

LORD
STRANLEIGH,
PHILAN-
THROPIST
ROBERT BARR

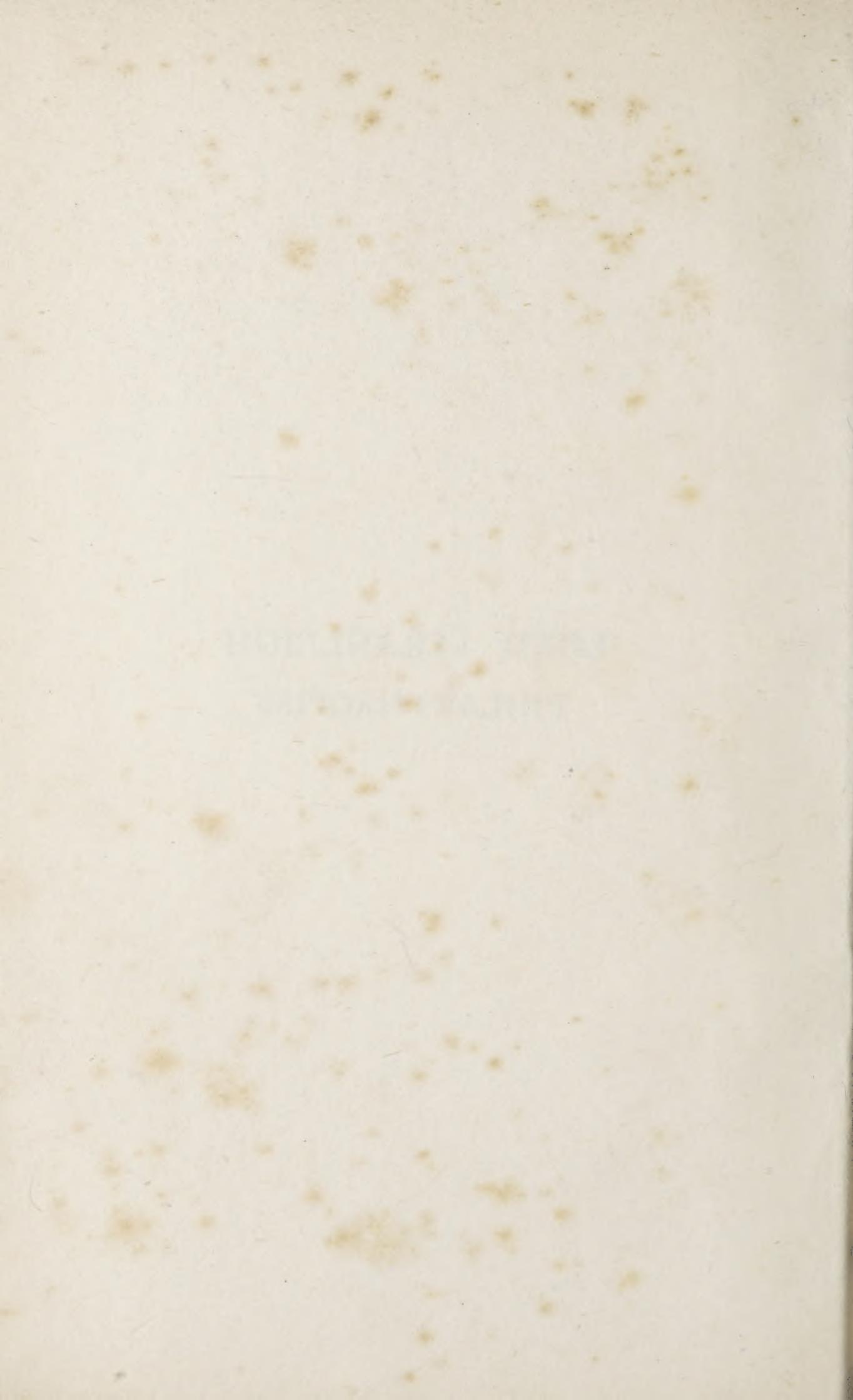
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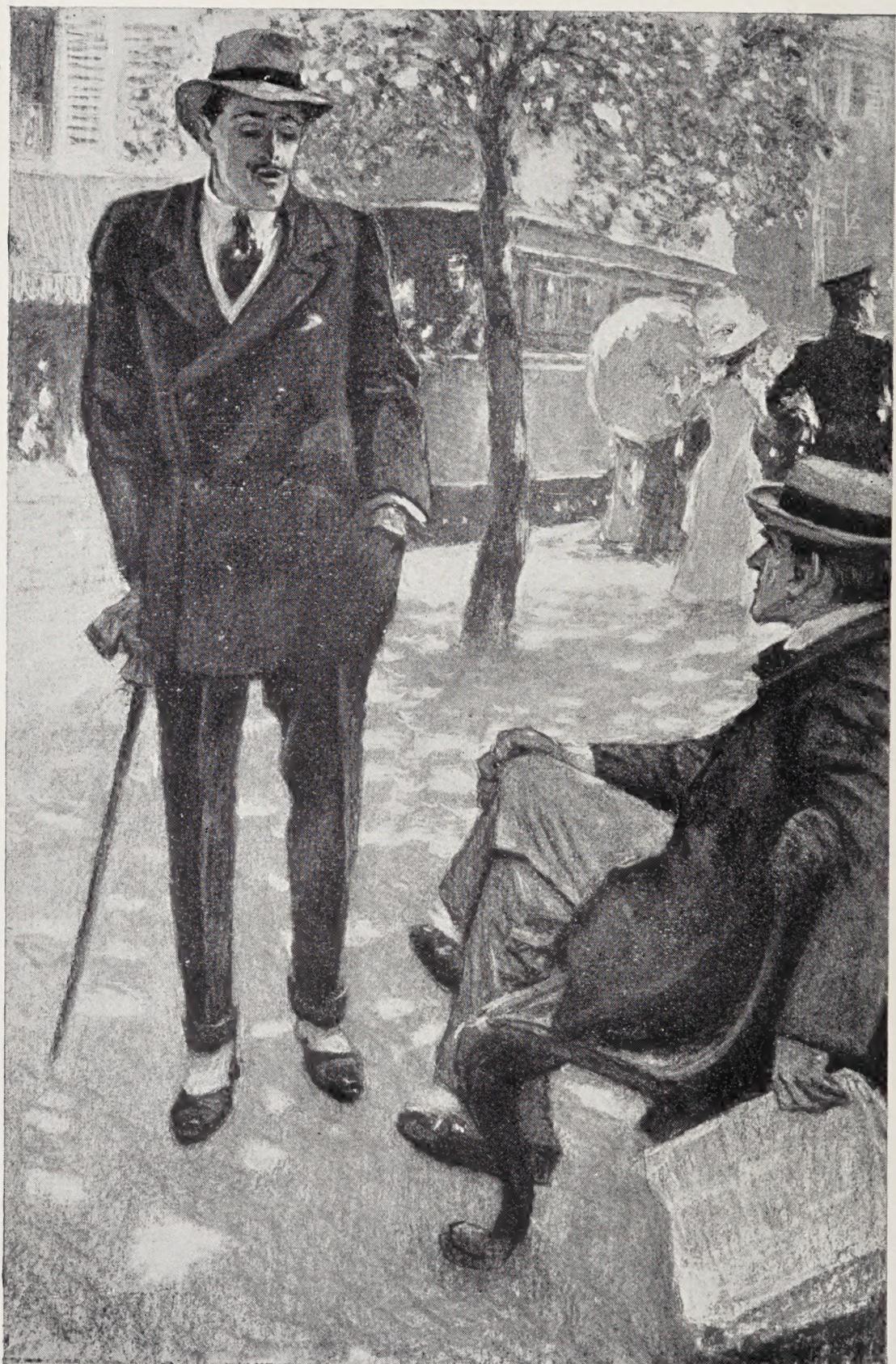


LORD STRANLEIGH
PHILANTHROPIST





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“ ‘ ‘ Very good, Mr. Garner. Tell me exactly what to do.’ ’
(Page 38.)

Lord Stranleigh, Philanthropist

[Frontispiece]

LORD
STRANLEIGH
PHILANTHROPIST

BY
ROBERT BARR

*Author of "Young Lord Stranleigh," "The Mutable Many,"
etc., etc.*

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LORD STRANLEIGH, PHILANTHROPIST.

CHAPTER I.

BORROWING STRANLEIGH'S NAME.

THERE comes a period in the life of every man when, no matter how successful he may have been, he thinks for the moment he has chosen the wrong career. The comedian yearns to play Hamlet, and the world-renowned portrayer of the melancholy prince imagines he could set audiences in a roar of laughter. The carpenter regrets that he did not select the trade of blacksmith, and the blacksmith, as he mops his perspiring brow over red-hot irons, hankers for the ice business, while the ice man wishes he dealt in coal.

Young Lord Stranleigh began to realise the futile part he played in the affairs of the world at the

time his friend and colleague, Mackeller, broke down in health. Now, Mackeller was a much more stalwart man than the slim and elegant Stranleigh, yet a London specialist informed him that his nerves were gone; that worry and anxiety had for the last few years so strained the heart that the price of prolonged existence was complete cessation from work, and withdrawal from business of any kind.

An English specialist who has successfully attended a member of the Royal Family, thus attaining instantaneously a European fame that years of hard work would never have achieved, does not temper the wind to the shorn lamb, but states the result of his diagnosis with a terseness that rather appals the ordinary man. The blow in Mackeller's case was softened by the fact that the big-boned Scotchman did not believe a word the expert said. There was nothing the matter with him, he averred, but an occasional distressing shortness of breath. His trouble was bronchial, and not cardiac, he insisted. The famous physician shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

“If you know so much of your own condition, why trouble coming to me?” he asked, with some show of reason.

“It is quite impossible for me,” continued

Mackeller, "to cease work at a moment's notice, as you suggest. Very large interests are involved, and any neglect of them might be ruinous."

"That's what every business man says," replied the doctor. "In your case, keep on as you are doing, and you have less than six months to live."

Peter Mackeller listened to this sentence of death with bowed head and furrowed brow, still incredulous; nevertheless, being an intensely practical man, his mind at once took up a search for an alternative. Perhaps, after all, this gruff medico might know what he was talking about. Never during his strenuous life had Peter experienced a single day's illness. The strong physique which his Highland ancestry had transmitted to him could surely not break down thus completely before he reached middle life. Most of his forefathers had died young at a hundred. Peter muttered to himself, rather than addressed the doctor—

"Perhaps Stranleigh would take charge of my affairs for a while."

"Do you refer to Lord Stranleigh?" asked the expert.

"Yes; he's an old friend of mine. He has got me out of trouble several times; I mean, of course, financial trouble."

“ You say Earl Stranleigh of Wychwood is a friend of yours ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Well, if any man in England can afford monetary aid without feeling it, it is his wealthy lordship. I should be glad if you would bring him here one day, when I could discuss your case with him more freely than I can with you.”

“ There has been no lack of definiteness about your statements to me,” said Mackeller, looking up. “ You need not reproach yourself on that score.”

The great man smiled for the first time. He had been visibly impressed by the friendship with Lord Stranleigh, for, after all, even the Royalties he attended were paupers compared with the youthful earl, and money talks in London as is its garrulous habit elsewhere.

“ You see, it’s like this, Mr. Mackeller. Your heart is racing along at ninety-five beats to the minute, when it should be contenting itself with from sixty to sixty-five. Roughly speaking, every four beats of the heart require one inspiration of air to the lungs. Your conservative lungs are vainly endeavouring to keep pace with your radical heart. The late Sir Henry Irving did me the honour to call

BORROWING STRANLEIGH'S NAME. II

at these rooms, and I told him exactly what I have told you. By a curious coincidence, his answer and yours were almost identical. He said it was impossible for him to stop work at the moment, because of numerous engagements he had accepted, and further stated that the only inconvenience he suffered was an increasing shortness of breath. In six months he would knock off for a while, but he could not do it then. Before six months were past, he was in Westminster Abbey. I suggest that you consult your friend, Lord Stranleigh, and bring him here, say a week from to-day, at this hour."

With that Mackeller took his leave, still wondering how much truth, if any, there was in the doctor's prognostications. He stepped into the electric brougham awaiting him in Harley Street, and curtly ordered his man to drive him to the office. Seated in the noiseless vehicle, he endeavoured to throw from his mind all thought of the doctor's doleful diatribe, and concentrate his attention on the business now awaiting him. He was disquieted to find that in spite of himself the sentence of six months kept running through his head like a recurring decimal. Suddenly he touched the electric button, and as the driver slowed down, directed him to turn round and proceed to Stranleigh House.

Although half the world had done half a day's work, the energetic Mackeller found, as he expected, that the easy-going young nobleman had just finished breakfast.

"Ah, Peter," cried his lordship, "there is little use in wishing you the top of the morning, for you have always transmuted the early golden hours into coin of the realm before one sees you! As the old adage says, 'Satan finds some mischief still' —no, no, that's the wrong one. Truth is, I'm hardly awake yet. What I wished to lay my hands on was, 'How doth the little busy bee improve each shining hour,' and gather money all the day, etc., etc. You've come in the nick of time for a sweet-when-the-morn-is-grey cigarette; or perhaps you prefer a fragrant Havana?"

"No, thank you, Stranleigh. I've knocked off smoking."

"Really! Since when?"

"Since ten o'clock this morning. I have just come from a Harley Street specialist in heart disease. My own physician made an appointment with him for me at half-past nine. He is a man with more patients than he can rightly look after, and grants consultations at odd hours as if he were conferring a favour."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear you are feeling seedy ! What did the specialist say ? "

"He said I must instantly cease work, and this command comes at a most inconvenient time. It seems I need to undergo a complete rest for an indefinite period, so I wondered whether you would take charge of my business, *pro tem.*"

"Certainly," said Stranleigh, the half-bantering, humorous expression disappearing from his face, giving way to a look of deep concern. "What did the doctor say was the trouble ? "

"My heart has gone all wrong."

"Ah ! the heart is a most important organ, which must be taken care of. It slumbers not, nor sleeps."

"The specialist tells me," replied the matter-of-fact Mackeller, "that the heart sleeps in that fraction of a second which occurs between beats."

"Really ! I am profoundly ignorant about these things, but I keep a walking cyclopædia in the person of my friend Ponderby. What course of treatment does the doctor recommend ? "

"We did not get that far. Probably I shall retire to my place in the country, where I can secure rest and quiet. He suggested that I should bring you with me a week from to-day, at nine-thirty."

“ Why does he wish you to take me at that unearthly hour ? ”

“ Oh, I suppose,” replied Mackeller, with impatience, “ that everyone wishes to see the great Lord Stranleigh.”

“ Ah, yes ; I had forgotten ! Quite natural, quite natural. Did the doctor counsel your country place as a sanatorium ? ”

“ No ; that was my own idea.”

“ I believe your country house is connected with the city office by telephone ? ”

“ Yes ; it has that advantage.”

“ Pardon me, Peter : you mean disadvantage, and a very vital disadvantage, too. However, let us summon authority to our aid, for, as I tell you I am profoundly ignorant.”

He touched the bell, whereupon the grave and dignified Ponderby appeared silently as a genie responding to the rubbing of a lamp.

“ Ponderby, when a man is afflicted with an affection of the heart—I refer to a physical affection —what should he do ? ”

“ It depends, my lord, upon whether he prefers to reside in France, Belgium, or Germany.”

“ He prefers, Ponderby, to live in England, but that is not the point. His chief desire is to live.”

"The strongest waters for the purpose, my lord, are those at Bad-Nauheim, in Germany, a pretty little village to the east of the Taunus Mountains, twenty-three miles north of Frankfort-on-the-Main. The next strongest are those of Royat, in the centre of France, although the wells of Spa, in Belgium, are about equal in strength to the French waters."

"What do you mean by strength, Ponderby? Salt, sulphur, or what?"

"There is a very large proportion of salt in the waters at each place, but the strength I referred to, which has proved so beneficial in cardiac troubles, is carbonic acid gas, held in solution by the waters of each district."

"Thank you, Ponderby."

Ponderby bowed, and vanished as silently as he had appeared.

"Well, Peter, there you are, with a choice of three nationalities, and of three charming health resorts. Which do you prefer?"

"I should say Nauheim. As it possesses the strongest waters, the cure would probably take the shortest time," replied the practical Mackeller.

"That appears reasonable; still, we'd better make sure."

He touched the bell once more,

“ Ponderby, I forgot to ask you, does one drink the waters at these places, or merely bathe in them ? ”

“ In each locality, my lord, there are waters to drink, but the sprudel, or carbonic acid waters, are bathed in.”

“ Mackeller suggests that the waters at Nauheim being the strongest, a cure may be more quickly accomplished there.”

“ Not necessarily, my lord, for sprudel baths in their full strength are rarely administered at Nauheim. At each place treatment lasts from twenty-one days to six weeks, and it begins not with the carbonic acid waters, but with salt baths in ever-increasing strength. All but the most serious cases yield to treatment in any of the three towns.”

“ That being so, Ponderby, it doesn’t seem to matter much which an invalid chooses.”

“ I would not go so far as to say that, my lord,” replied Ponderby in a tone of profound deference. “ His most gracious Majesty King Edward visited Royat once or twice while Prince of Wales.”

“ Thank you, Ponderby, that is an unanswerable argument. Royat for Royalty, as one may say.”

For the second time the loyal Ponderby disappeared. When he had gone, Stranleigh laughed a little.

"Have you made your choice, Peter?" he asked, and Peter, apparently resenting the laugh when his case was so serious, replied with sullen Scotch stubbornness, "I shall go to Nauheim."

"Right you are," cried his lordship, "and I'll go with you!"

Mackeller glanced up at him in astonishment.

"You promised to look after my business while I was absent."

"Of course."

"But you can't do it if you are absent with me."

"Didn't you hear Ponderby say that Nauheim was only twenty-three miles away from Frankfort?"

"What has that to do with the matter?"

"Don't you know that Frankfort is the greatest financial city in Germany, if not in Europe? It is the town from which we draw, if not our Stranleighs, at least our Rothschilds, who have been reasonably successful commercially."

"I still don't see what connection that has with the affair in hand."

"Peter, if I am to take charge of your business, I must do it my own way. As I believe in going to the best spot for the cure of heart disease, I have made it my habit to select the best man I can find to transact each of the various concerns with which

I deal. As you know, I employ twelve of the shrewdest business men I can secure. To the chief of these I shall turn over the general direction of your interests, and he will distribute the different sections among the eleven others."

This by-proxy proposal did not commend itself to Mackeller, who sat glum and depressed while the scheme was explained to him. Stranleigh, however, continued unperturbed—

"Of course, Peter, if you'd like to have the business conducted as you would do it yourself——"

"That's exactly what I wanted, if possible," interrupted Mackeller, "but I suppose such a condition of things is not to be hoped for."

"Oh, bless you, yes, it is! Anything may be accomplished if a man really makes up his mind to it. Instead of employing twelve competent men, I'll substitute for two or three of them an equal number of ordinary, fussy individuals who will muddle whatever is put in their charge, and thus reduce the average of excellence to your liking."

Peter scowled darkly at him.

"What we wish to attain," Stranleigh went on, ignoring his displeasure, "is, first of all, the restoration of your health. Quite a secondary consideration is the carrying on of your business. A doctor will

tell you that during your cure you must not worry about temporal matters. Such advice is quite futile, because his patient is as unable to help worrying about things which may go wrong in his absence as he is to cure himself by an effort of will. Now, I can do for you what the doctor can't. I can control your affairs under a guarantee, my guarantee being that if money is lost in any transaction carried out on your behalf, I will make good the deficiency. If money is gained, it goes into your treasury. So, then, cast away all thought of business, knowing that if you were in the most superb health you could not accomplish more than I shall by giving you such a security."

"Oh," said Mackeller, "I could not think of accepting so one-sided an arrangement as that! It is 'Heads I win, and tails you lose.'"

"Precisely; but the agreement lasts only for a short period, six weeks at the most. Whatever losses I incur during that forty-two days will not matter a button to me, while it is imperative that the primary condition of your cure shall be achieved. I defy even a pessimistic growler like you to worry when you have accepted so advantageous a bargain. Now, we will regard that as settled, and I refuse to discuss it any more."

"My dear Stranleigh," said Mackeller, speaking with some difficulty, "Fate seems determined to place me under obligations to you that I can never repay."

"That's all right, Peter! Let us leave it with Fate. Now, will you be ready to depart with me for Nauheim to-morrow morning?"

"Oh, that is another thing I wish to speak to you about!" said Mackeller. "I cannot accept such a sacrifice on your part. You would be bored to death at a health resort filled with invalids. You must not accompany me to Nauheim."

"Friend Peter, I ask you to allow me to be a little selfish on occasion. I am going to Nauheim to prove whether or not it will cure *me*."

"Cure *you*! Why, there's nothing wrong with your heart, is there?"

"We read that the heart is deceitful, and desperately wicked, and that's what's the matter with mine. I learned its state, not from a doctor, but through introspection. An incident that occurred last week startled me. I engineered a deal against a man who asserted at the Camperdown Club that all the *coupes* for which I had received credit were the result of luck and not of brains. I used to believe myself that it was luck, but I wasn't going to permit

a man to state it publicly, so I gave him fair notice and attacked some of his favourite interests on the Stock Exchange. On Settlement Day he was thirty thousand pounds to the bad, while I was richer by that amount. This was all as it should be ; nevertheless, I caught myself, for the first time in my life, feeling an unholy joy at the accumulating of money. That frightened me. I saw that if I went on I should become like all the rest, raking money together into my bank account not because I needed it, but for the mere pleasure of handling the rake. I also caught a glimpse of the haggard face of my opponent, and realised he had lost money he could not afford to lose, while I gained cash I didn't need. I understood for the first time the tension a man like my adversary must go through when a sum of even that size is in the balance. I had just determined before you came in to study the other side of the question.

“ It is said that all the wrecks in the Atlantic ultimately gather in the Saragossa Sea. I resolved to find the Saragossa Sea of business, and observe the human wreckage accumulated there. I want to see the men of affairs who may have been successful or unsuccessful financially. I want to see them, not with a hawk-like predatory gleam in their eyes, as I have

met them in London and New York, but when they are paying the price. I want to see them not when they are paying in cash, but when they are paying with life. I want to see them, not gambling on the Stock Exchange, but when the grim figure of Death puts up the opposing stake. I want to see those men, a mere rumour of whose ill-health sets Wall Street in a tremble. I want to study the face of such a man when a famous specialist tells him he must cease all connection with the affairs of the world if he is to remain in it for another half-year."

"My God!" groaned Peter, "that's what the doctor told me!"

"Oh, you're all right, Mac! I'm quite certain that before two months are past you will be as well as ever again. You are engaged in legitimate business, not in gambling. But now you know why I am going to Nauheim with you. Will the nine o'clock express from Charing Cross to-morrow morning be too early for you?"

"Too early for *me*?" cried Mackeller in amazement. "I should say not, but how about yourself?"

"Oh, I'll make the effort on an important occasion like this! That will enable us to catch the Ostend-Vienna *train-de-luxe*, which will drop us off at

Frankfort. Still, it is a bit early, now you call my attention to it. Wait till I consult Ponderby."

When this well-informed man came in, Stranleigh said ingratiatingly—

"As you are in a measure responsible for our journey to Nauheim, perhaps you would be good enough in your own interests, for you are coming with me, to mention what train you prefer. I have been suggesting the sumptuous and speedy Ostend Vienna express. If that train does not rise to your ideas of luxury, I shall be glad to engage a special."

Ponderby's seriousness was in no way affected by his master's pretence that the servant's conduct was the chief consideration. He slightly inclined his head in acknowledgment of the persiflage, then replied soberly—

"I never recommend the Vienna express for any distance short of Nuremberg, where it arrives about eight in the morning. It reaches Frankfort at 3.29 a.m., an inconvenient—"

"That's quite enough, Ponderby," interrupted his lordship. "Although I might for once consent to reach Charing Cross at 9 a.m., I am jiggered if I'll alight at Frankfort at three in the morning. Trot us out another train, Ponderby."

"There's the afternoon train from Charing Cross,

my lord, leaving at 2.20. Sleeping-car Ostend to Cologne. A run up the left bank of the Rhine by daybreak, arriving in Frankfort just before noon."

"That's all right, Ponderby! I need not ask you to have everything ready by two o'clock to-morrow afternoon."

"Thank you, my lord. Everything is ready at this moment."

"Ponderby is mistaken. I'm not ready," said Mackeller querulously.

Lord Stranleigh glanced at Peter with just the slightest touch of astonishment.

"Why, my dear Mac, I've given you five hours extra. I understood you were willing to take the nine o'clock train, and now you don't need to depart until two."

"Five hours are of no use to me; indeed, five days will probably prove inadequate. Half a dozen imperative affairs require my personal attention."

"What are they?" enquired Stranleigh, with mild indifference.

"I have points of disagreement with three men and two companies, any of which may lead to a suit at law unless diplomatically handled. If not settled before I leave, they will worry me all the time I am away."

"Ah, we mustn't allow that," said his lordship. "Now, just oblige me with the names and addresses of your protagonists, the amount in dispute in each case, and also in each case the exact terms of a settlement satisfactory to you."

Reluctantly Mackeller did as requested, Ponderby providing him with paper and pencil, his lordship contenting himself by lighting cigarette after cigarette as an aid to business. While Mackeller wrote out his list, Stranleigh requested Ponderby to telephone solicitor number one, asking him to call immediately at Stranleigh House. When Mackeller handed the list to his host, the latter rose languidly, nevertheless with a distinct air of dismissal. He had had enough of that glum Scotchman for this particular occasion.

"Now, Peter," he said, "go home, and let nothing prevent your keeping the appointment with me at Charing Cross to-morrow afternoon at two. Bring your own valet with you. I am too selfish to spare Ponderby's ministrations. Besides, a crank like you would worry the sedate Ponderby into heart trouble before a week was past."

"I'm no crank," cried Mackeller angrily, "but a man of business who likes to see affairs carried on in a ship-shape way."

“Pardon me,” replied Stranleigh, with the utmost placidness. “Unfortunately spoken language does not differentiate between terms as the written word does. I’m not using American slang, but good solid German, when I call you a crank. I use a ‘k,’ not a ‘c.’ The German word for a man who is ill is ‘*kranke*.’ More correctly at this moment you are a ‘*herzkranke*.’ Do brush up your German, Peter, but anyhow, don’t fail me at Charing Cross.”

“Oh, that’s all very well, Stranleigh, but while I’m in danger of being dragged before the law-courts——”

“Within half an hour this possible litigation will be in the hands of the most competent solicitor in London, so I implore you, Peter, to go home, and allow me time to give a few orders. I must get into telegraphic communication with the German Government in order that my own comfort, and incidentally yours, shall be properly looked after.”

Mackeller proved very difficult to manage, as, indeed, all strenuous men are when they only half believe what the doctor tells them, and feel irritated at the thought of even a temporary suspension of business. Stranleigh, however, was imperturbably good-natured, though he sighed with relief when finally he got Peter aboard the sleeping-car at Ostend.

Peter did not sleep well during the early part of the night. He had looked up the route, and worried over the fact that he must rise before reaching Herbesthal, in order to pass his belongings through the German Customs. This ceremony, which would take place somewhere between four and five o'clock in the morning, he regarded as a stupid, thoroughly foreign proceeding, and furthermore, as the sleeping-car did not go beyond Cologne, at six o'clock he must get into the train for the left bank of the Rhine. Notwithstanding, during the long wait at Brussels he dropped off into a sort of stupor, having enjoyed little real slumber since learning the seriousness of his condition.

It was after nine o'clock when he woke with a jump, knowing that everything had gone wrong because of his temporary oblivion. His room was still dark, although sunshine struggled through chinks of the blinds. He turned on the electric light, and a glance at his watch threw him into a panic. The train was humming along merrily, and the Lord only knew in what direction it was going. More than three hours had elapsed since he should have changed carriages, and doubtless all his baggage was retained at the German frontier,

Trembling with excitement, he wrapped a dressing-gown round him, and stepped out into the corridor, where he was met by the unruffled Ponderby.

“I must see Stranleigh at once,” demanded Mackeller. “I wonder if he has the least notion into what part of Germany he has got us. And then there’s the luggage: every stick of it held up at Herbesthal these four or five hours !”

“His lordship,” responded Ponderby, pronouncing the title with gentle deference, “is not to be disturbed until eleven o’clock, as we approach Frankfort. This carriage goes through from Frankfort to Nauheim, as it came through Cologne for Frankfort. The luggage is all aboard, and has been examined. His lordship will breakfast between Frankfort and Nauheim, but I have orders to attend to your wants whenever you call. He recommends a nice fresh sole, which we took on at Ostend, or an excellent Rhine salmon, obtained at Cologne. His lordship is anxious to eliminate all cause of worry, and so empowered me to open and read to you any telegram that came from London. Already several messages have been received pertaining to his own affairs, but one arrived half an hour ago, at our last stop, which may interest you. All your threatened law cases have been

settled at a figure ten per cent. higher than you had stipulated for. I may tell you privately that in each case his lordship gave your opponents the opportunity of compromising on this basis, or being involved in law proceedings with his lordship himself. Such is the power of money that in every instance his lordship's reputation as a very wealthy man carried the day. Did you say sole, or salmon, Mr. Mackeller?"

"A grilled sole," muttered Mackeller, who thereupon retired to dress. Ponderby's words were unexceptionable, but his tone implied a subtle condescension which Mackeller resented. It was only too evident that Stranleigh's valet regarded him as a fussy muddler of affairs, in no way to be compared with his slothful, but efficient master.

Mackeller's medical examination at Nauheim resulted in his being ordered into a private sanatorium, where communication even with friends was forbidden, and Stranleigh felt a qualm of meanness at the relief caused by this announcement.

There was much to interest a stranger in Bad-Nauheim. At first sight it seemed exclusively the stamping ground of the rich, for its new bathing houses were models of modern convenience and luxury, while comfortable hotels, lavishness in well

laid-out parks, and the general expensiveness of its Parisian shops, marked it as a resort of the wealthy. Soon, however, the young nobleman learned that great reductions were made to people whose income was less than two-thousand-five hundred marks a year, and that the Bath Direction, in extreme cases, remitted the fees altogether.

Lord Stranleigh's mind being turned in the direction of finding some means to do good with his money, other than by the haphazard charity in which he was accustomed to indulge, found himself confronted by an obstacle seemingly insurmountable. He felt a reluctance he could not overcome in approaching a person evidently poor, and scraping acquaintance with him. Such an action on his part seemed impudent; indelicate; an unwarrantable intrusion. He was therefore deeply gratified when a man undoubtedly in low financial condition made the first advance.

He had frequently observed this man, and wondered why he was poor, for his face was keen and vulpine, a countenance that betokened power if ever a countenance is any index of character. The eyes, however, were dull and expressionless, and Stranleigh thought that in spite of the masterful face they betokened a vacant mind. But once

he caught them fastened on himself with such intensity that it almost made him shiver.

“That man’s an anarchist,” he decided, but the explanation came immediately.

“I beg your pardon,” said the stranger, “but have you finished with that newspaper in your pocket ?”

“Oh, quite,” responded Stranleigh, “and you are very welcome to it.”

“I only want a glance at the news. I’ll give it back to you in a minute.”

“I take only a glance at the news myself,” replied Stranleigh, “so I don’t wish it returned if you will be good enough to accept it.”

“You are very kind. The truth is I can’t afford to buy a paper in this town. I can get better dailies where I come from, for a cent, and here they charge four to six times that much.”

Stranleigh sat down beside him on the bench. They were in the Parkstrasse, with many passers-by going up to the afternoon concert at the Kurhaus. The person who couldn’t afford a newspaper showed great familiarity with the one presented to him. He scanned its columns with lightning rapidity, then folded it up, and handed it back. For a moment it seemed to Stranleigh that his threadbare

acquaintance was already aware of the journal's contents, and had made his request merely as an opening for conversation.

"I am not well enough dressed," he demurred, when Stranleigh proposed they should go to the concert together, "to mix with you swells on the terrace, and though I understand the music is good, I don't care much for music."

"I'm no swell," said the younger man with a laugh, "and I've just invited you to come there with me."

"No swell!" cried the other. "Why, I heard a person who spoke English say, as he pointed you out, that you were Lord Stranleigh, and he added you were the richest man in Europe."

"Oh! I don't know about the richest, but my name happens to be Stranleigh."

"I didn't believe about the richest myself. If a man has a little money, people always call him a millionaire, and generally he isn't. But their calling you a lord interested me. I'd never seen a real live lord. I thought they didn't speak to ordinary folks."

"My fault," confessed Stranleigh, "lies rather in the opposite direction. I'm so anxious to talk to people, that I sometimes find a difficulty in getting them to talk to me."

"Well, I resolved to make a move toward you, and then when I got back home I'd tell them that I'd talked with a genuine lord."

"Where is 'back home'?" asked Stranleigh.

"I guess I'd better introduce myself, as one good turn deserves another. My name's J. W. Garner. I'm clerk in a railway freight house, in Beloit, Wisconsin."

"Is that a remunerative occupation?"

"I can't say that it is, although I live fairly comfortable, and make enough money to come over here without asking anybody's help, and take the treatment without going on the pauper list. Still, it isn't in a freight house that big money is made in the railway business. Some chap on Wall Street, that never saw the railroad, will make more money on it in ten minutes than we clerks can in forty years."

"Yes; or lose it," said Stranleigh.

"Certainly, he runs that risk, but those chaps on the inside don't lose anything. E. L. Bannerdale, for instance."

"Curiously enough," replied Stranleigh, "I was just thinking of him. A great deal depends on the point of view in this world, and it occurred to me how much more lucky you were than Bannerdale."

“Pshaw!” cried Garner, impatiently, “Bannerdale must be worth sixty million, if he’s worth a cent.”

“I daresay, but look at the unhappy man’s position at the present moment. He has taken a house in Vienna that occupies a city square, and to keep away the reporters, has garrisoned it as if it were a fortress. Everyone knows he is stricken with a dangerous disease, and has come to Vienna for treatment, and we all are aware that a man in his condition needs quiet and rest; yet quiet is the one thing he can’t buy. Stocks fluctuate up and down according to the rumours coming from that house of death, as it probably is, for he has been reported dead several times, and reported convalescent, and reported incurable: nobody really knows what his condition is except his physician. But to torture a very sick man in this way seems to me abominable.”

J. W. Garner shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

“They’ve got to have the news,” he said, “and anyhow I guess there ain’t much sympathy for old Bannerdale in the States. He looted too many people when he was well, and I expect there’s a feeling of relief now that he’s deadly ill. After all, I don’t believe his death will make very much

difference. He's sure to have things fixed up so that if he pegs out, affairs will go on pretty much as usual. He's an important man, I admit, but he's only one of a group, and the group won't let things go to smash."

"Why," said Stranleigh, "the very paper I handed to you just now says that his most intimate friends have turned traitors, and believing he cannot recover are buying, or selling, or doing something they shouldn't do."

Garner laughed harshly.

"Then God pity them," he said, "if old Bannerdale gets well!"

"Doesn't the career of a man like Bannerdale create dissatisfaction and arouse envy among the less fortunate of his fellow citizens?"

"Oh, I don't know. I guess not much. I never felt envious of anybody, because I knew if I got a chance I'd do the same thing."

"You never had the chance, then?"

"Oh, I have had thousands of chances. In one way or other I secured information that would have made my fortune had I possessed the money to buy at the proper time; that would have made dozens of fortunes with one rich man to back me."

“ Did you ever try persuading the rich man ? ”

“ Lord bless you ! yes, but the difficulty is to get the start. Nobody will listen unless you’ve put through a deal that’s been successful. You see, everybody’s singing the same song. You can’t meet a man who won’t agree to make you rich if you’ll just grub-stake him with a few thousand dollars.”

“ Have you given up hope of finding your rich man ? ”

“ No ; I’m at it just now. That’s why I scraped acquaintance with you.”

“ All right, Mr. Garner. You’ve got me persuaded, so here’s your chance at last, with a man who doesn’t care a rap whether he wins or loses.”

“ Well, sir, that’s the kind of man I’d like to do business with. I should hate to lose money for anybody, just as I’d hate to lose it myself, if I had some. Now, what I wanted that paper of yours for was to see whether the stock of the Great South-Western Short Line had gone up or not. Instead of going up, it’s dropped down. If I had money, I’d put every cent of it in that road.”

“ Do you mind telling me why ? ”

“ Oh, you want to back out ! ”

“ I never back out. I’ll give you the money

now, if you're in doubt. How much do you need? A hundred pounds, or a thousand?"

"Well, I guess I don't want any money at all, but I'd like you to take as much stock as you care to handle, and just hold it for a week or two. If my tip isn't any good, then you don't owe me anything: if it is good, I'm content to take whatever you think it worth."

"Well, if you would trust me that far, it's funny you won't say why you expect this stock to rise."

"I don't mind telling you, but if I were you, I wouldn't talk about it. This is the road that Bannerdale nearly had possession of at the time he broke down, and his doctors told him to go to Europe and quit business entirely. He must have absolute rest, they said. All right. He goes and barricades himself up, then his partners, thinking he isn't going to get well, begin to sell, and the stock goes down. Now, Bannerdale held an option on the majority of that stock, an option that doesn't expire for another month. He depended on certain banks and trust companies and financial friends to furnish the money, but the moment exaggerating newspapers said that Bannerdale was a dying man, they all deserted him, and he couldn't get a cent. When he actually left for Europe, all Banner-

dale stocks dropped six points, and they've been going down ever since, especially when it became known his partners were selling. Now, I believe Bannerdale will secure that road, sick or well."

"You're betting, then, on Bannerdale's life or death?"

"Exactly."

"You think he is going to live?"

"I do. He's a tough nut, is old Bannerdale."

Stranleigh rose to his feet. "Very good, Mr. Garner. Tell me exactly what to do."

"You see that place opposite?" said Garner, pointing to a broker's office on the business side of Parkstrasse. "You go over there, and tell them to put you on to the chief office in Frankfort by telephone; buy as much stock of the Great South-Western Short Line as you care to carry."

"Shall I do this in my own name, or in yours?"

"In your own name, of course. You'll be giving them a cheque for the amount. Besides, as I said, I'm quite willing to take whatever you allow me, and we don't need any documents about it."

"Right," said Stranleigh. "Here is my address, and whenever you wish me to sell, drop in on me and give the order. Good afternoon."

Nearly a week passed, but Stranleigh saw nothing

of his dilapidated client. He began to wonder whether the man was a swindler of some sort, but for the life of him he could not see how Garner was to make any money out of the deal Stranleigh had put through in his own name. Enlightenment came to him one morning at breakfast, when he opened the Paris *New York Herald*. The headlines were sufficient, and ran as follows:—

“GREATEST COUP OF MODERN TIMES.
BANNERDALE HAS NEVER BEEN IN VIENNA AT ALL,
AND THE REPORTERS HAVE BESIEGED
AN EMPTY HOUSE.
LORD STRANLEIGH, ENGLAND'S MULTI-MILLIONAIRE,
COMES TO BAD-NAUHEIM IN HIS SPECIAL
CAR TO MEET BANNERDALE,
WHO IS IN DISGUISE.
STRANLEIGH WILLING TO BACK BANNERDALE WITH
A HUNDRED MILLION POUNDS IN HARD
CASH IF NECESSARY.

“Panic and ruin among the anti-Bannerdales . . . Great South-Western Short Line stock jumps thirty-three points . . . Cable kept red-hot offering Bannerdale unlimited capital, but he isn't taking any . . . Believed in Wall Street that his illness was a bluff . . . Wall Street says cardiac trouble impossible, because Bannerdale *has no heart.*”

CHAPTER II.

THE MUSIC OF THE SPHERE.

LORD STRANLEIGH was not house-cleaning exactly, but rather furbishing up a bit, for he expected a distinguished visitor. The *rapprochement* between Russia and Britain was to be helped forward another notch by the entertainment of His Highness Prince Azov. A great banquet at the Guildhall had been arranged, presided over by the Lord Mayor, and attended by members of the Cabinet, Ambassadors, Ministers, representatives of science, art, and literature, with a generous sprinkling of English nobility ; indeed, one or two scions of the Royal Family would occupy seats of honour at the Guildhall table. The Prince was to be presented with the Freedom of the City in a gold box, and during the first week of his stay in London some important and dignified function was allotted to every day.

Throughout this week the Prince was to be the

guest of the Russian Embassy ; after that he came to Lord Stranleigh, removed the decorations of his rank, and then the pair, who were old friends, intended to have a good time together like any other young men about town.

Stranleigh was giving final instructions regarding the preparation of the suite of rooms for Prince Azov's occupation when the usually imperturbable Ponderby came in, betraying a state of agitation which filled his master with astonishment. Ponderby's stout figure seemed to have shrunk. His erstwhile rubicund countenance was actually pale, and his face wore a crestfallen expression almost akin to terror that was not without its touch of comicality. Indeed, Stranleigh almost smiled, and, in fact, would have smiled, had the victim been a man of less consequence than his indispensable valet. But instead of smiling, he spoke very calmly.

“ Well, Ponderby, what's the trouble ? ”

“ It's the Suffragettes, my lord. They demand to see your lordship, and won't believe you're not at home. There's about twenty of them, my lord.”

“ A mere mistake in identity, Ponderby. Tell them the address of the Premier is No. 10, Downing Street. Turn them away firmly, but kindly.”

“ They won’t be turned away, my lord. The moment the footman opened the door, they rushed him ; nearly knocked Spilkins over, my lord, and now they’re all in the hall, except one, who stands outside the door, waving a banner inscribed ‘ Votes for Women.’ ”

This time Stranleigh did smile, in spite of himself, as he pictured the six-foot Spilkins, so cold and formal in manner, unexpectedly submerged at the door by an impetuous onrush.

“ Ponderby, when you are captured, the only thing to do is to capitulate as gracefully as possible. Go to the hall, Ponderby, take a glance over the assembled women, and note the general tone of their costumes, then show them into whatever room best corresponds in colour and decoration with their own attire. Tell them I shall do myself the honour of waiting upon them within five minutes. Ask Spilkins to lure away the bannered young lady from outside the door, then, when you have them all seated comfortably, report progress to me.”

The score of ladies were in quite a flutter when they learned how easily victory had come to them, and there arose a murmur of admiration as the solemn Ponderby ushered them into one of the

most beautiful drawing-rooms they had ever seen. The girl with the banner rolled it up hastily, as if somehow it was out of keeping in a salon displaying such perfect taste. When all were seated, the silent Ponderby withdrew, closing the door very gently behind him.

“I wonder,” said the lady with the banner, “if we are trapped. This all seems too easy. I believe Lord Stranleigh has got us in here so that he can slip out unseen, for his motor-car drove up just as I came in. I should have remained on guard.”

She rose impulsively from her chair, and gave a flirt to the banner that partially unrolled it.

“I’m off to intercept him,” she said, but a very quiet old lady, with beautiful grey hair, spoke soothingly.

“Sit down, my dear. I know Lord Stranleigh. He would not do such a thing.”

The girl, but half convinced, slowly re-seated herself. She was in a room where every prospect pleases, and only man is vile. She knew their sneaking ways. However, she made no audible protest, and her companions were all very quiet, as though rather awed by their surroundings, and the celerity with which their desire had been accom-

plished. The door opened, and the Earl of Stranleigh entered.

As he came in the door closed behind him without any visible motive power. His eye took in very quietly, yet without seeming to do so, the group awaiting him, and then lit up with pleasure as it recognised the thin, delicate old lady with grey hair who rose to greet him. His indolent manner fell from him like a discarded cloak. He came forward rapidly, bent over her proffered slender, white hand, and raised it to his lips with old-fashioned courtesy.

“We have rather stormed your citadel,” she began.

“Dear madam, had you only let me know you were coming, you would have found my door wide open for your reception, yet you come so splendidly chaperoned that I fear this may be a business visit, and not a friendly call.”

“I hope you will regard it as both.”

“I cannot be so impartial, madam, and am certain to incline towards the friendliness, for, after all, I am but a poor business man.”

“You are quite alone in that opinion, my lord. Indeed, we are here because of your latest *coup* in business, and so that we may not take you more

by surprise than already has been the case, I warn you to prepare for an unanimous vote of censure."

"Dear lady," laughed Stranleigh, "why use a threat when I am eager to obey your slightest request?"

The girl who had been on guard slipped the stick with its furled banner out of sight behind her chair. This meeting was too much like a scene from a society play: there was nothing militant about it.

"Pray be seated, madam," said Stranleigh, "and that will allow me to take this chair fronting you all. They say that when danger threatens the best plan is to face it, which accordingly I do. To what successful *coup* do you refer?"

Stranleigh took a chair near a table.

"The newspapers have printed column after column about it. Assisted by the weight of your money, that arch-rascal, Bannerdale, secured his second line to the Pacific, and 'froze out,' I think is their term, meaning ruined, a vast number of unfortunate men opposed to him."

"Yes," said Stranleigh, "I received many hundreds of letters on that subject, and talking of votes of censure, I've been censured by every reputable journal in England. The incident just proves

what I have been saying to you, namely, that I'm no man of business at all, but merely a gullible simpleton."

"Why, how can that be, if it is true that you cleared nearly a million by the deal?"

"I certainly gained a sum of money, the amount of which I have not had time to enquire, but that was an unintentional side-issue. I made no protest against what the journals said, yet I should be sorry for you to misjudge me. My mind has recently turned towards the possibility of giving away money by some method which will do good instead of harm. At a health resort on the Continent I met a man who seemed poor and ill, and at his behest I made a railway investment through a Frankfort firm. The profits, if any, were to go to him, while the loss, if any, was borne by me. It turned out that the person calling himself Garner was in reality the multi-millionaire railway king, Bannerdale. He needed the use of my name, and secured it. He published a quite untrue statement that I was his partner, and thus was enabled to consummate the deal he had in hand. He never applied to me for a penny of the money I made on his behalf, and so, you see, instead of wearing the hoofs and horns presented to me by the Press, I was merely

the victim of a man much shrewder than myself. I confess that the contumely heaped upon me has not caused me an hour's wakefulness, but if you ladies add a vote of censure, then shall I be indeed desolate."

Many of the delegation laughed, and it was evident his young lordship had nothing to fear from that quarter. The lady with grey hair now spoke, very gently and very charmingly :

" I am sure I express the sentiment of this Committee when I say we are all glad to know you invested in an American railway speculation solely to benefit a fellow-creature whom you supposed to be in distress. We came here hoping to show you a better use for your money than that to which you had devoted it."

" You mean, madam, that I should contribute to the cause of Woman's Suffrage ? "

" Yes."

" That I am very pleased to do, and if you assist me by naming the amount, I will send a cheque to your treasurer at once."

" On behalf of my fellow-workers, not only of those here, but of the thousands labouring elsewhere for our cause, I thank you for your great generosity. Our mission now being accomplished, I shall detain

you no longer than it takes to tender our gratitude for your kind reception of us."

The young man was rather confused as he listened to these words, and the slight ripple of applause they called forth, but the tension of the situation was relieved by the young woman who carried the banner rising to her feet.

"I thought our chairwoman would, perhaps, embody those sentiments, with which we all agree, in a formal vote of thanks, and that in seconding this motion I should find opportunity for speaking on a subject very interesting to me. I gathered from the Earl of Stranleigh's remarks that he has given some thought towards the distribution of money to aid the down-trodden and the afflicted. If this is so, I should like to ask what success has followed his philanthropy?"

Stranleigh laughed a little, and tried to shake off his embarrassment.

"My efforts can hardly be dignified by such a term as philanthropy. It is a question that bristles with difficulties. When I give a sovereign to a sober ragamuffin, if I meet him again before the money is spent I regret to find he is then usually a drunk ragamuffin. In a larger way, where I depend on my own judgment, as was the case with

the American I have spoken about, my effort has merely meant the discomfiture of people unknown to me that I would not willingly have injured. This is doubtless because I am rather a muddle-headed person, and a muddle-headed person with good intentions and plenty of money seems to be a distinct danger to the community. I try to inform myself of what wiser people have done, but my search has not proved encouraging.

“ Through the genius of the late Sir Walter Besant a great people’s palace was erected in the East End, which, I am told, has failed in its object on account of the abstention of those it was intended to benefit. That gracious lady whose memory is revered by us all, the late Baroness Burdett-Coutts, carried out what seemed a most practical project by building a huge market in the East End, where poor people might obtain good food at reasonable prices, but she merely disturbed, temporarily, the costermonger trade, and I think the great building, if not abandoned, is used for other purposes than the one for which it was erected. The poor, apparently, would have none of it.

“ The other day, as I drove from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, I noticed along the road great iron pipes being ruined by rust, and learned from my dragoman

that years before the Baroness had bestowed a very large sum of money for bringing the pure water of Solomon's Wells to Jerusalem, which has always depended for its supply on the rains, gathered into filthy tanks. The bulk of the money had been stolen by Turkish officials, and these broken, rusty pipes were the useless result of a most beneficent plan. So you understand my difficulty ; I am quite willing to give, if assured the donations would accomplish any useful purpose."

"Don't you think," replied the young woman, "that these failures are due to the indolence and ignorance of the giver ? The man with money, unless he has made it himself, is indolent, and therefore, to gain information, does not take the trouble a business person would expend before making an investment."

"Doubtless, madam, that is very true in my own case, for I am both indolent and ignorant. Money seems as dangerous to meddle with as dynamite. I read in the bankruptcy proceedings, the other day, of a young and industrious mechanic earning good wages, whose uncle in Australia left him sixteen thousand pounds. That sum lasted him a year, or nearly so, and when it was spent he got amazingly into debt, and now is adjudged a bankrupt, with

no chance of his creditors receiving a penny. A year ago he was a useful and estimable citizen ; to-day he is a vicious loafer, a human derelict."

"That may be an exceptional case," said the confident one.

"Perhaps. Have you any suggestion to make ?"

"It seems to me, in the instances you cited, that neither the Baroness nor Sir Walter took the trouble to find out what the poor really wanted or needed. They bestowed upon them, therefore, something they did not require. Now, I think a man with time at his disposal should examine the matter, as I may say, from the ground up. He might take an individual, study him, discover what was really needed, and supply the deficiency."

"Madam, you describe exactly what I did in the case of Mr. Bannerdale, *alias* Garner, yet see how narrowly I missed a vote of censure from you for that very action."

"My lord, have you ever seen the play, written by one of us, entitled 'Diana of Dobson's' ?"

"I have not enjoyed that advantage."

"It deals very cleverly with the subject we are discussing."

"Very well ; I shall secure a box at once."

Before the banner girl could say anything further, the lady with grey hair rose.

“I think,” she said, smiling, “that the Earl of Stranleigh has earned the formal vote of thanks you suggested, and so, taking it as proposed and seconded, I beg to tender it, and bid him farewell.”

Saying this, she marshalled her following, and departed.

When Lord Stranleigh left Kingsway Theatre he was thinking less of the employment problem in the play than about its acting. The American actress, Miss Lena Ashwell, had been superb, and Norman McKinnel, whom he considered Britain’s greatest tragedian, caused him to wonder why McKinnel, having the production of the piece in his own hands, had chosen for himself the humble *rôle* of policeman, appearing only for five minutes or thereabouts in the darkened picture of the last act, which represented the outcasts dozing on the benches of the Thames Embankment.

Stranleigh walked down Kingsway to the Strand, entered the Gaiety Restaurant, and treated himself to a well-chosen supper. When he emerged, remembering the last scene of the play, he strolled down Arundel Street to the Thames Embankment, intended

to be London's chief boulevard, although this thoroughfare, bordered by great luxurious hotels, becomes after nightfall an out-door bedroom for the penniless ; millionaire and pauper sleeping within a stone's throw of one another. However well the Thames Embankment may compare with a Parisian boulevard during the day, all the brightness of the latter is absent at night, for here no cafés and restaurants face the river.

Stranleigh's first impression was how well the actual benches of the Embankment imitated their counterfeit on the stage. Even the slow policeman that passed him walked with McKinnel's measured step. The young nobleman aroused the first sleeper, asked a few questions, and receiving replies that he didn't in the least believe, presented the derelict with a sovereign, telling him to get something to eat, and a more comfortable bed. This was repeated again and again, and monotonous iteration indicated that no denizen of the Embankment was there through any fault of his own.

Stranleigh knew that many a man who later became famous spent his first night in London on the Embankment, and he hoped that by chance he might succour some genius, yet he fancied in such case his benefaction would not have been so greedily

accepted as it was by these outcasts. He yearned for someone to tell him to go to the devil and leave the slumberer to his rest, but he met no such cheering indication of independence combined with dire necessity.

The slow policeman, marching by the parapet, paused and watched him with some suspicion in his attitude. Finally the officer spoke.

“Rather a dangerous business, sir.”

“I know it is,” said Stranleigh, coming alongside. “I don’t believe in indiscriminate charity, but these poor wretches are so far down in the social scale that perhaps a little unexpected money will do them no harm.”

“That wasn’t quite what I meant, sir,” said the policeman, who seemed disappointed to find Stranleigh was not intoxicated, as he had evidently surmised. “Some one you’ve given money to has already passed on the word, and if you’re not careful you may find yourself waylaid and robbed. Better let me whistle a cab for you, sir.”

Stranleigh laughed.

“I’m not afraid, officer, but I daresay you know the crowd a great deal better than I do. I gave a sovereign to each of those who have since vanished. I hoped I might learn something, but I find I haven’t,

so if you don't mind, I'll make you my proxy charity commissioner."

The young man gave the astonished constable a handful of gold, and said :

" You take your percentage out of that, and distribute the rest among those who need it most."

" With your permission, sir," said the policeman, " I'll change all this into silver to-morrow, and divide it to-morrow night. I suppose you don't know that these people would have some difficulty in getting honest change for a gold piece. None of them could convince anybody they came fairly by it."

" I hadn't thought of that. I'm rather a bungler, you see."

" Well, sir, begging your pardon, you don't seem very wise."

" You've hit the nail on the head, officer. Good-night to you."

" Better have a cab, sir. You may get your own head hit before you leave the Embankment."

" My skull is too thick to be injured by any of these weaklings. Good-night."

" Good-night, sir."

The policeman stood watching as Stranleigh walked

rapidly toward Westminster, then he poured the gold into his pocket.

All those whom Stranleigh had aroused that night showed the cringing disposition of the very poor. They seemed anxious about one thing only, which was to say whatever might please the man who accosted them, in the hope of obtaining a sixpence or a few coppers at the end of the discourse. They represented merely human *débris*, and even the optimistic Stranleigh realised that they were of no use either to humanity or themselves. The money he gave them would be spent, and afterwards they would sink into the same condition in which he found them. He drew a deep sigh of disappointment at the result of his experiment.

He was nearing Westminster Bridge when he noticed some distance ahead a man whose arms rested on the top of the river wall, the one person, except the policeman, he had seen that night ignoring the meagre comfort of the benches. As he neared this person Stranleigh stopped, and himself leaned against the parapet, just under the ornamental lamp-post that rose from the wall. Stranleigh himself was in comparative obscurity, but the lamp shone full on the intellectual face of the stranger. It was a pathetic countenance, indicating great

refinement, but the stamp of starvation was visible on the pallid features. It reminded him of one of the six pictures drawn by the late Fred Barnard to illustrate Dickens ; the picture of Sidney Carton about to mount the scaffold, and looking back over his shoulder with the same wistful expression which was now before him in life.

Stranleigh remembered Fred Barnard with a pang of regret. One night, when they were dining together, Barnard had told him the history of the picture ; how he searched in vain through London and Paris for any man whose face would realise his own dream of Sidney Carton. Then one night, under a lamp-post in Paris, he caught a momentary glimpse of the person who fulfilled his requirements, with refined features softened by the grief of a saviour, but the face was that of a woman, and he finished his well-known picture by placing a woman's head on a man's body.

Here, then, at last, was a fitting subject for any beneficence the young nobleman cared to bestow. Despite his evident hunger, the stranger appeared lost in some ecstatic dream, and he did not hear Stranleigh approach, but started when the latter accosted him, awakening from his reverie as if he knew not where he was.

“ You pursue your meditations at a late hour, sir, and in an unaccustomed place.”

After a moment the stranger replied :

“ *Ya ne govoriu po Anglisku.*”

“ Ah ! you are a Russian, and do not speak English,” commented Stranleigh, using somewhat haltingly the other’s language. “ I possess one or two good friends in Russia, but confess that my attempts to converse in their tongue meet respectful sympathy, rather than commendation.”

The stranger smiled, and his visionary eyes glistened with delight at even this attempt at his own speech.

“ Do you understand French ? ” asked Stranleigh.

It appeared that the stranger did, and their future communication took place in that language, which the Russian spoke exceedingly well.

“ As I told you,” Stranleigh went on, “ I have several friends in Russia, of whom I am very fond, and for their sakes I proffer my assistance if you happen to need it.”

“ You are most kind,” replied the Russian, “ and it is true, as doubtless you have surmised, that I am in dire straits. I have had nothing to eat for nearly forty-eight hours.”

“ That is a state of things permitting no delay

in the amending. Blessed is he who has nothing, for he need fear no trap. Will you come with me to my house, since all the restaurants of London are closed ? ”

They walked together to Westminster Bridge, where a friendly policeman whistled for a wandering cab, and then looked with some astonishment at the strangely-assorted pair. A hansom came flying across the bridge in response to the call. The richest man and the poorest in Europe got in together, and drove to Stranleigh House, where his lordship found an excellent supper laid awaiting his return.

“ Champagne ? ” asked Stranleigh.

The Russian hesitated.

“ I suppose,” he said at last, “ you keep no vodka ? ”

“ As it happens,” answered Stranleigh with a laugh, “ I have just stocked a quantity of it ; the best that can be found. My chief Russian friend is to visit me next week.”

“ I will take a little vodka, then,” replied his guest, “ since I have fallen into fortunate circumstances. I am sorry to be of such trouble, but the sudden change from hope to realisation has shown me how physically weak I am.”

His fine white hand trembled as he raised the

raw vodka to his lips, refusing to have its potency mitigated by water.

“ Ah ! ” he sighed, setting down the glass again, “ that assures me I am still in the land of the living. I must now eat very sparingly.”

They sat down together, the visitor diluting his vodka with water, still refusing champagne. After the meal Stranleigh pushed over to him a box of Russian cigarettes, then took one himself.

“ Will you tell me all about it now,” he said, “ or shall we wait till morning ? ”

The Russian did not answer on the moment, which hesitation appeared to be a habit of his, but gazed about as if marvelling at the luxury in which he found himself. As the aromatic smoke of the cigarette rose in the air he heaved a deep sigh of contentment.

“ Does that mean, sir, that you offer a complete stranger the further hospitality of a bed ? You hint I am to be here in the morning.”

“ Morning is so close upon us that it would not be worth your while searching for a lodging at this hour. Indeed, a stranger with no English might meet difficulty in obtaining a resting-place, and, besides, you could find nothing in London so comfortable as it is my privilege to offer.”

“Sir, I hesitate to trespass——”

“It is no trespass, monsieur. This is a bachelor establishment, and I consult no one’s convenience but my own, or that of my guest, and I assure you of an English welcome, recalling to your mind that our countries are friendly.”

“Gospodín, if you allow me to sleep here on the sofa, it will be as heaven compared with the place where you found me.”

Stranleigh laughed.

“In one at least of your Eastern religions there are seven heavens, and I prefer to send you to the seventh rather than the first. And now let us introduce ourselves. My name is Stranleigh.”

“I am Vassili Nicolaievna. Until recently I was a student at the University of St. Petersburg.”

“Did you take a literary course there? I have guessed you to be a poet. Am I right or wrong?”

“Both, Gospodín Stranleigh. I dream poetry, but cannot express it in words. Still, I try to give expression to my dreams through these.” He stretched out his hands; white, slight, but nevertheless powerful. “I have devoted my life to music, and so did not finish the course at the University. May I give you a song for my supper?”

He waved a hand towards the very splendid

grand piano which stood at the end of the dining-room, ready, when Stranleigh gave a bachelor dinner, for the entertainment of his guests.

“I should be delighted,” said his lordship.

The Russian opened the instrument, and sat down, plunging into a weird, fantastic, rather terrible selection that Stranleigh had never heard before. Then, after a moment’s pause, he made the piano sing like a nightingale.

“Heaven prosper us!” ejaculated Stranleigh, when he rose, “I have never before heard that piano. You possess all the power of Rubinstein and all the delicacy of Paderewski. Who wrote that music?”

“Mine, mine, mine!” cried Nicolaievna. “Rubinstein was a Russian, and Paderewski is a Pole, but in music both belong to the past. ’Tis not up their stairway I am climbing. Wagner is the first step in my ascent, then Strauss, with his ‘Elektra’; by and by it will be Vassili Nicolaievna. I came to London to play my soul-stirring symphony of humanity; a composition to echo round the world. I expected help from my musical brethren, but such is the jealousy in the ranks of those who should most appreciate me that they turned the cold shoulder. They declare I am not to be heard, and without money I am powerless.”

“ I should have thought,” said Stranleigh, “ that any true musician would welcome you with open arms.”

“ It is not so ! ” exclaimed Vassili. “ They are all comfortably situated here, and why should I come to disturb their slumbers? Jealousy, jealousy, jealousy ! Each knows in his heart that I tower above him as the peak of the Kremlin looks down upon the lowest hovel in Petersburg.”

Stranleigh could scarcely repress a smile at the colossal conceit of the man, but nevertheless, from his playing and his composition, he deemed it justifiable, and attributed its blatant expression to the influence of vodka. The Russian’s arms were gesticulating like those of a Sicilian actor, as he continued :

“ My great symphony of humanity, could I but be allowed to render it here in London, will concentrate upon me the attention of the universe. The echoes of its harmonies and its discords will ring down the ages, and yet am I nullified for the lack of a hundred roubles.”

“ No ; you are not,” said Stranleigh. “ You wish to collect a critical audience here in London, and perform before it ? ”

“ Yes,” answered the Russian.

“Very well, I will finance you. Not with a hundred roubles, but ten thousand, if you desire them, and the money is at your disposal to-morrow morning.”

Greatly to Stranleigh’s embarrassment the mad musician flung himself at his lordship’s feet, seized a reluctant hand, and covered it with kisses.

“Tut-tut!” cried Stranleigh, with an uneasy laugh. “We are not rehearsing a sentimental play, you know. You are overwrought, and so, for that matter, am I. I consider you the greatest genius I have ever met, and your music will haunt me while I live. Have no fear that you will languish for lack of opportunity, but meantime let us to bed, for there is strenuous work to do in the morning.”

“Work to do! Work to do! Yes; and I must keep my head cool and my hands steady.”

He held out these capable instruments of his will, and Stranleigh touched the bell.

On the day that the luncheon to Prince Azov was given at the Guildhall, one of those imposing processions in which Londoners delight set out from the Russian Embassy in Belgrave Square, proceeded up Grosvenor Square to Hyde Park, then down Piccadilly to St. James’s Street, and so through Pall Mall, the Strand, and Fleet Street, to the City.

There were several carriages, preceded and followed by a clanking company of horsemen, whose breast-plates glittered in the sun, and whose gay uniforms added a touch of colour to the drab streets through which they passed.

The foremost carriage contained the Russian Ambassador, accompanied by several high nobles of that empire. In the next carriage sat only two persons : Prince Azov, the honoured guest of the day, and by his side his most familiar English friend, the Earl of Stranleigh.

The streets on either side were lined with troops, and behind them was massed a very good-natured crowd, who vociferously cheered the spectacle. Along Piccadilly, down St. James's Street, and to the further end of Pall Mall the clubs were resplendent with bunting and decorations, and in the Strand, venetian masts had been set up. All London seemingly was enjoying a holiday, turning out to honour the White Czar's representative. Everywhere the procession was welcomed by hurrahs and gladsome greeting, the waving of hats and handkerchiefs, and indeed, the young Prince, who smilingly acknowledged the enthusiasm, was a magnificent specimen of manhood, clad in Oriental splendour, and well worth coming out to see.

As they passed into the Strand, his Highness said : “ You are a fortunate people, Stranleigh. I should feel rather nervous if taking part in a similar display through the streets of Petersburg.”

“ Oh, you are quite safe here ! ” replied his lordship. “ Rightly or wrongly, we are so tender with the denizens of the under-world, that they will not risk their own safety——”

Stranleigh sprang suddenly to his feet, and stood covering the Prince with his body.

“ Seize that man ! ” he shouted, in a voice that rang out above the cheers, so startling was its note.

To Stranleigh the whole mob had but one face ; the pallid, ecstatic countenance of the mad musician. His right hand was raised above his head, grasping a black iron ball, and there for one brief section of a moment it paused as the amazed Nihilist caught sight of his benefactor, but before a policeman could move, a spasm of determination swept all reluctance from that wonderful face, and he launched his bomb straight at the carriage.

Stranleigh in his time had been a notable cricketer, saving many a hard-fought field for his public school and college, and more than one person in that day’s crowd, not yet realising what had happened, noted with admiration how the young man quite uncon-

sciously assumed the attitude of a fielder, and deftly caught the missile, allowing it to swing gently to rest past his body.

Now the policeman grasped the Nihilist, who struggled fiercely for a moment, and then grew suddenly calm. The procession had stopped. The crowd was silent. An officer of the force came out from a restaurant, carrying a pail of water, and as he held this up to Stranleigh, the latter very gingerly placed within it the deadly sphere. The anarchist, as he was led away, shouted loudly :

“ *Khoroshó proshtcháité, Gospodín. Skólko platí?* ”

“ What does he say ? ” whispered Stranleigh, as he sat down again beside the imperturbable Prince who, during this time, had not changed countenance or moved a muscle.

“ His Russian is rather incoherent. I fear the man is excited. He appears to address you, saying it’s all very well, bids you good-bye, and asserts he will pay the price, or perhaps rather asks what it will cost, an enquiry that is a trifle belated. Poor chap ! We are both rather helpless ; he in his place, I in mine.”

“ He is a man of genius,” said Stranleigh, “ towering genius, who threw away with that bomb a career of the greatest.”

CHAPTER III.

“MY LIBRARY WAS DUKEDOM LARGE ENOUGH.”

LORD STRANLEIGH OF WYCHWOOD rarely allowed any expression of annoyance to escape him, but one morning at breakfast, on opening his favourite daily paper, an item that caught his eye caused him so far to forget himself that he gave utterance to the phrase :

“ Dash it all ! ”

It says much for the training of Ponderby, who was waiting upon him, that this excellent servant never moved a muscle on hearing the unaccustomed exclamation. Whatever astonishment Ponderby felt was very effectually concealed. Stranleigh said to him, more peremptorily than usual :

“ I wish, Ponderby, you would be so obliging as to telegraph my agent Wilson, asking him to take the first London train, and call on me here before luncheon.”

"Very good, my lord," replied Ponderby, departing on his mission.

After his master had finished breakfast, Ponderby turned to the newspaper page that had aroused this unwonted exhibition of feeling, and had little difficulty in finding the item which he knew had displeased his lordship. The paragraph ran as follows :

"Mr. Peter Barnacle has promised to build a library in Stranleigh village, if the inhabitants will provide a site for the building. As all property in the vicinity belongs to Lord Stranleigh of Wychwood, there is little doubt that a beautiful plot of land will be offered by his lordship, so that advantage may be taken of this munificence."

Ponderby read the paragraph twice with slightly puckered brows, as if failing to understand why the extract should have caused annoyance. It seemed very good indeed of Mr. Barnacle to provide for the mental enjoyment of that delightful old English village, but instead of being thankful, Lord Stranleigh had gone to the extreme of saying "Dash it all!" As Ponderby carefully folded up the newspaper, and put it away, he murmured to himself :

"I wish I 'ad his money," but whether this referred to Mr. Barnacle or Lord Stranleigh we

shall never know, for Ponderby rarely confided in any one.

The young nobleman returned home at eleven o'clock, and half an hour later Wilson, the agent, put in an appearance. Wilson was a very brisk, business-like man, with a hard face, a lowering brow, and lips which had a touch of tyranny about them. Although obsequious enough to Stranleigh, he was very domineering to those over whom he exerted power, and was generally disliked by villagers and tenants. It was his boast that he stood no nonsense from that class of people, and his attitude was one of protection so far as Stranleigh was concerned, not concealing the fact that but for him his lordship would be robbed right and left. If any of the tenants ventured to appeal to Stranleigh direct, under a sense of oppression, that tenant was almost certain to meet misfortune in his future career, although it was rarely possible to trace calamity to Wilson himself.

Lord Stranleigh was perhaps unduly lenient on these occasions, for whoever came to him with a hard-luck story found his complaint promptly and favourably attended to, but as Wilson became better known, these appeals to Cæsar were less and less frequent. Although Stranleigh

himself felt an instinctive distaste for Wilson's society, and more than once had reproved him for his lack of sympathy with the tenants, and occasionally had even determined to dismiss him, he recognised his good business qualities. Besides that, he shrank from displacing any man in the Stranleigh service, except on irrefragable proofs of dishonesty or unfairness, so Wilson stayed on year by year.

"Good morning, Wilson. I telegraphed to you because of an item in to-day's paper. Is it true that Mr. Barnacle has offered a library to Stranleigh village ? "

"Yes, my lord ; I believe it is."

"You *believe* ! Aren't you *sure* ? "

"Yes, my lord, I am *sure*."

"Then why did you not write to me about it ? "

"I didn't know that it would interest your lordship."

"Anything pertaining to the estate interests me, and I dislike reading in the newspapers information that should already be in my possession about my own affairs. Is it not a fact that there is a very well-selected library now housed in the Village Hall, the books of which are at the free disposal of all inhabitants ? "

“Yes, my lord.”

“Did the villagers apply to Mr. Barnacle themselves ?”

“I believe they did, my lord. A public meeting was held some months ago, at which it was stated that the books at the Village Hall had all been read over and over again, and it was unanimously voted that application should be made to Mr. Barnacle. After some investigation that gentleman agreed to build and equip a library.”

“I see. Did any one propose application to me ?”

“I think not, my lord.”

“Do you know why ?”

“Well ; I suppose they did not wish to trouble your lordship, as you had already done a great deal for the village.”

“That’s all very well, Wilson, but I think you should have looked after my affairs a little more closely than has been the case, and I ought to have been communicated with, as lord of the manor, before an appeal was made to a stranger.”

“It never occurred to me that Mr. Barnacle would consent, because Stranleigh village is rather an unimportant hamlet. Still, your lordship has now an opportunity of assisting. It is proposed that a delegation wait upon you for the purpose of obtaining

a site, which is one of Mr. Barnacle's provisos. It is suggested that you donate that plot of grass land at the head of High Street, under the hill where the road turns to the left."

"I see; which means that there will be built a blatant, red-brick, red-tiled piece of architectural modernity dominating the High Street, and completely out of keeping with the rest of the village. Suppose, then, I refuse the request of the delegation?"

Wilson shrugged his shoulders.

"In that case, my lord, you will effectually put an end to the project."

"Quite so, Wilson. I hope you see now into what a predicament you have placed me. If I give the ground, I shall spoil the village, and if I refuse, all the newspapers in the country will hold me up to scorn as the tyrannical landlord, quite callous regarding the culture of the people. I shall be charged with keeping them in the dark, so that they may vote in consonance with my own ignorance."

"Adverse comment may be very easily prevented, my lord."

"It could have been prevented easily if you had taken action in time, but I am not going to interfere with the liberty of the British Press.

I believe we have some rather strenuous Socialists in Stranleigh village."

"Yes, my lord, we have. There are at least half a dozen who should have been packed off the place months ago. I can do it yet if you give me permission."

"Oh, bless you, no ! I am rather by way of being a Socialist myself ; indeed, I have allowed free use of the Village Hall, and I supply the reading-room with all the Socialistic journals I can find. Were the Socialists, as I suspect, leaders in this new plan ? "

"They have taken a very active part in it, my lord."

"Very well, Wilson. You will return to Stranleigh village, and convene the inhabitants thereof in the Public Hall. Apologise to them for my neglect in allowing the present library to become out of date, and tell them I am in full sympathy with their desire for improvement. By the way, do you know how much Mr. Barnacle intended to spend on this building ? "

"I am not sure, my lord, but I think something like three thousand pounds."

"Well, that is very good of him, so I beg you to have drafted a most cordial letter of thanks, declining the donation. This should be signed by yourself,

and by all the villagers. You may then announce that I will allot five thousand pounds for the building, because I wish to approve of the plans, and be assured that the library is in keeping with the rest of the village, as nearly as modern construction can compare with the excellent architecture of two or three centuries ago. I will donate the piece of land you suggest, and provide an ample supply of books, both ancient and modern.

"The ancient books will be largely of my own selection, but I request you to write to every publisher in London for his catalogue, and these catalogues I wish placed on a table in the reading-room of the Village Hall. As it is the villagers themselves who complain of lack of modernity in our present selection ask them to be good enough to examine these lists, and let each place his initials before whatever book he wishes. All these volumes I will buy and send down to you. I shall also set aside and invest a capital sum of money, the interest of which will keep this library going for ever ; the income being sufficient to pay for all clerical work, repairs, and additional volumes as they are issued."

Wilson hesitated.

"I think, my lord, we run some risk of offending Mr. Barnacle, who has been very generous in the

matter. If you allow him to go on with this scheme, I would see to it that the next proposal made by the villagers is submitted directly to you."

"I am quite sure Mr. Barnacle will take no offence if you write him a courteous and tactful letter. Everything depends on that, Wilson. Tell him that he has spurred me to action, and thank him on my behalf for doing so. It is the outsider who sees most of the game, and I am very grateful to him for pointing out a way, which apparently I should have taken long ago.

"Meanwhile, set about obtaining plans from some of our best architects, not neglecting to give the younger men a chance. I think I would rather not have a competition. I will suggest some names, and you can add others. Photographs of Stranleigh village might be taken, and sent out with your request for plans. Secure at first a series of sketches, for all of which you will pay. I shall make a selection from these sketches, and then you may ask the architects to visit Stranleigh village, at my expense, examine the site, and estimate its capabilities, afterwards supplying detailed plans and elevations, and naming their own fees for this work."

Wilson protested that such terms were unduly generous; quite unnecessarily so, he maintained, but

Stranleigh replied drily that all he asked of Wilson was that he should carry out the scheme as outlined, seeing that every one working in connection with it was duly recompensed. Wilson, over-ruled, begged his lordship's pardon if he displayed too much zeal, giving as an excuse the plea that he thought continually of his lordship's interests, there being, it seemed, so many outsiders who wished to take advantage.

“That's all right,” said his lordship airily. “The advantage-takers are in reality the rich man's best friends, for they continually strive to make possible his entrance to the kingdom of heaven. What is a rich man for, if not to be taken advantage of? Although the wealthy may not be appreciated in Paradise, they get more than their share of attention in this world, and thus we strike a balance. However, Wilson, let us, as practical men, adhere to this mundane sphere and leave Paradise alone for the present.

“Frankly, I dislike having my hand forced, as is the case with this library, and I consider you have neglected your duty in allowing an unnecessary agitation to reach a point of finality without acquainting me. Stranleigh village, with its small population, needs a new library just as much as our

farm carts need three wheels each. Still, there's no use in growling over spilt milk. Make out a deed of gift transferring the plot of land to whatever authority takes charge of the new institution, but insert a proviso that should the plot of land be used for any other purpose than that which we have in view, it reverts once more to the estate. You may draw on me to the extent of five thousand pounds, but if the cost of the building exceeds that sum, let me know, and I will supply the deficit."

With this Wilson took his departure, and Stranleigh speedily forgot all about the matter.

It would be ridiculous to assert that a young athlete like Stranleigh lacked the physique to pursue the London season to its bitter end. Although there was certainly an air of great indifference in his manner, he was quite free from that intellectual languor which causes a man to look down upon what is termed "the frivolity of Society." He always regretted his own lack of cleverness, and admitted shamefacedly that many features of the London season he thoroughly enjoyed, such as polo at Ranelagh, cricket at Lord's, and most of the races. Besides, he knew that London expects every man to do his duty in a country where the women out-number the men, so Stranleigh, in addition

to being an occasional host, was an indefatigable guest.

The beginning of May saw him enter London's season with the very best intentions, determined not to weary in well-doing till July was ended. He plunged manfully into the social maelstrom, no one more eager to please, or, what is especially valued in London society, no one so easily pleased. Nevertheless, just as the London season was at its height, Stranleigh began to see visions.

Sometimes these dreams would picture to him a rock-environed, sea-coast bay, with a little fishing village on its margin; but more often the mirage represented a secluded spot in the forest of Stranleigh Park, where, in a green glade, crystal waters came tumbling over rocks, and, running rapidly and merrily through woods and meadows, formed one of the choicest trout streams that a fisherman could wish to cast a line upon.

Young Blake, the secretary, always made allowance for these visions, and prepared for them. Towards the middle of each June Blake's communications with the world of fashion changed purport, from "Lord Stranleigh is delighted to accept" to "The Earl of Stranleigh regrets he is

unable," and thus he was prepared for the inevitable annual question—

"I say, Blake, how many invitations have I accepted for next week ? "

"None, my lord."

"Good. Nothing to prevent me from running down to Stranleigh Park ? "

"Nothing, my lord."

"All right ; I'll spend the week-end there, at least."

Blake always smiled at this.

"You needn't grin, Mr. Blake. I'm not actuated by sentiment, as you appear to think ; a visit to the ancestral home ; one's cherished birthplace, and all that sort of thing. No ; I can enjoy there what is quite impossible in London : an old and very disreputable suit of knickerbockers, so dilapidated that if worn outside the limits of Stranleigh Park I should run a risk of being arrested as a vagrant. Once at Stranleigh Park I may not return to London at once. Blake, you're grinning again ! It's a bad habit. Avoid it. Truth is, I've got some new fishing tackle that I wish to test. I love an old stream, old clothes, and new tackle. Besides, by the lassitude that's coming over Ponderby, I know he wishes to visit his relatives, though he will sacrifice

himself as long as I stay in London. It seems ludicrous to think of Ponderby having relatives, but we must take his word for it, so on my behalf strike a sort of social balance-sheet, and close the books. See that no letters are sent on, and then get off yourself. Where are you going this year? Switzerland, the Pyrenees, or does high living prescribe Marienbad?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter about me, my lord."

"Of course not; but where?"

"Well, a friend of mine has a nice little yacht, and we were thinking of the Norwegian fiords."

"The yacht isn't fitted with wireless, is it?"

"No, my lord, quite a modest sailing craft, that we work ourselves."

"Excellent, excellent. Couldn't be better. No possibility of our communicating with one another. Good luck to you!"

The same afternoon the young nobleman arrived by train at Stranleigh station, a good four miles from the village of that name. There was no one to meet him, for he had come unannounced and without *impedimenta*. Striking across country, and walking through forest and field, mostly over his own property, at last he saw Stranleigh Man-

house, nestling in the upper part of a well-wooded valley, sheltered on three sides from the winds.

Stranleigh had tramped over the hills, and now stood for a few minutes enjoying the view from the highest part of his estate. Half a mile further down the valley, along the banks of the stream, lay the rural village, quaint with its grey stone, ivy-covered walls and thatched roofs, while above it rose the grey, square Norman tower of the old church. From the end of the High Street up through the trees, came an unaccustomed note of colour, which, except for its steadiness, looked like the blurred suggestion of a fire. Stranleigh knitted his brow, wondering what it was, then, walking down the path towards the house, the view became more distinct, and he saw a two-storied building of very red brick, covered with equally red tiles. Then, suddenly, he remembered the new public library, and realised that his own money had placed there this violent contrast to the subdued hue of the ancient village.

“ I wish I had built it with stone,” he said, with a sigh. “ By jove, I’ll do it yet, or else cover it with plaster ! ”

He entered his house, went to his room, and arrayed himself in the disreputable knickerbockers

and ancient Norfolk jacket of Harris tweed. Under the collar of his grey flannel shirt he tied a frayed scarlet cravat, then surveyed his full-length reflection in the pier-glass with an expression of satisfaction. The best-dressed man in London was now an excellent representative of a tramp.

"My tailor would have a fit if he could see me, and I should need to explain that this anarchist neck-tie is to place me *en rapport* with the new library."

Passing down the carriage drive which wound among the trees partially hiding the house from the king's highway, he entered the main street of the village at its lower end, and there received, like a slap in the face, the full effect of the brilliant edifice, apparently built to cross the road at the upper end.

As Stranleigh gazed up the street with stern disapproval on his face, he murmured to himself—

"I am either confoundedly stupid, or Fate has turned against me. I spend five thousand pounds to help on the culture of the neighbourhood, and merely succeed in spoiling the prettiest village in England. That blatant building must be replaced."

At this point he was accosted by the oldest inhabitant, Samuel Nubbins, whose bent, shrunken figure was supported by a thick stick.

“ Welcome 'ome, my lord,” said Nubbins cordially, and as the ancient used the title in every sentence he spoke, it will be omitted in recording his conversation.

“ Good evening, Mr. Nubbins; how are you? You seem to be the only one of us who never grows older.”

“ I be main old, and I've lived to see great improvements in my time, please God! I never expected to live long enough to see so grand a house as that put up in Stranleigh village.”

“ Neither did I,” replied the young man grimly.

“ It be wonderful what rich men do for us in these days,” continued Nubbins.

“ It is indeed. I understand you asked for the library.”

“ Yes; but the idea would never have come to me. I be too old and stupid.”

“ You do yourself an injustice, Mr. Nubbins. You are old, and very, very wise, and I rejoice to hear that the scheme originated with some one else. Who was that brilliant person? ”

“ We had public meetings; two or three on 'em. All was in favour.”

“ I daresay,” concurred Stranleigh. “ I've yet to hear of a public meeting that's not in favour of

getting something for nothing. But who was the moving spirit?"

"Why, Bill Perkins had more to do with it than anyone else, and people are not so hard on Bill as they used to be, 'cause he stood up for our good."

"What, Bill Perkins the poacher?"

"Well, they do say he poached now and then, but, after all, it's never been proved."

"No; I admire Bill's dexterity in setting traps so successfully, and never getting into one himself; but William as an advocate of literature rather amazes me. He'll be proposing to go to Oxford next."

"I daresay he's been there. He's a great traveller, is Bill, and when things get a bit hot in one neighbourhood——" Old Nubbins checked himself, finding he was verging on slander. The character of the estimable Perkins seemed to have improved. Nubbins changed the subject abruptly.

"At the last meeting we passed a unanimous vote of thanks to Mr. Peter Barnacle for his great kindness to us. They do say he have a pot of money."

"Then it is Mr. Barnacle who has been so generous about the library?"

"Oh, yes," replied Samuel, surprised that such

important doings in Stranleigh village should be unknown in London. "We've had brisk times with them workmen here, and there wasn't a room to let in the place; all taken up. They opened a branch of a bank at the post-office, and a clerk came down from county town every Friday, to pay off the men, but they're all gone now, worse luck! Rare times we did have!"

"Then the library is finished?"

"Yes. 'Twill be opened next Wednesday."

"Really?"

"Why, haven't you seen the bills? They're posted all over the place. Mr. Peter Barnacle is to make a speech, and your own factor, Mr. Wilson, will introduce him, and there's Bill Perkins's name in big letters."

"You astonish me. Is Bill to be there?"

"Yes; his name is printed out 'Mr. William Perkins,' and he's going to give an address on what books have done for him."

"Ah! And what have books done for him?"

"I suppose Bill means to tell us that on Wednesday. A good speaker is Bill, and fond o' reading, they say, along of being alone by himself——"

"On other people's property?" suggested Stranleigh.

"He's on your property now," said the conscientious Nubbins.

"I can well believe it."

"But he's within his rights, for Mr. Wilson, he made a gamekeeper of him."

"The deuce you say! Set a thief to catch a thief, eh? I am learning a good deal since I left London this morning."

"Ah, they must be ignorant folk up in London."

"They are, Mr. Nubbins. Good evening to you. Thank you for your conversation, which I have enjoyed very much."

Nubbins beamed with gratification as he hobbled away, and Stranleigh walked up the street to the new library building. He was astonished to see, carved in a stone over the door—

THE BARNACLE LIBRARY,
Erected 1910.

The windows and doors of the red structure were all open, as if to allow the plaster to dry, but Stranleigh did not enter. He strolled down the road to the post-office, and sent away several telegrams to London. This done, he continued his walk to the gates of the park, but instead of going up hill to the Manor-house, he deflected his course until he came

to the residence occupied by Wilson, where he knocked at the door.

A deferential servant showed him into the drawing-room, and presently Mrs. Wilson appeared, an anxious-looking, middle-aged woman; not long recovered from a serious illness, if one might judge from the pallor of her countenance. She was undoubtedly much perturbed at thus unexpectedly meeting Lord Stranleigh, and it was with difficulty she could repress her agitation.

“Good evening, Mrs. Wilson. I came down from London to-day, and just dropped in to see your husband.”

“I am sorry he is not at home, my lord.”

“Ah, well,” said Stranleigh, rising, “it doesn’t matter. Do you expect him back to-night?”

“No, my lord; he will not return till Wednesday morning.” Then, seeing Stranleigh’s look of astonishment, she added, “Mr. Wilson has had much to do with the new library, and I understood it was with your permission.”

“Oh, quite with my permission, Mrs. Wilson, and really his absence makes no difference. I suppose you have his address, where I could telegraph him?”

“He did not leave an address. All I know is

that he went to Manchester, and will return on Wednesday morning with Mr. Peter Barnacle, for he has ordered the carriage to meet them at Stranleigh station. They are to inspect the library privately, then come here for lunch, and in the afternoon the public opening takes place."

"I see. A most excellent arrangement."

"Perhaps, my lord, you would honour us by lunching here, with Mr. Barnacle?"

Stranleigh, still standing, glanced down with a smile at his faded knickerbockers.

"I am no fit guest, Mrs. Wilson, for any well-ordered household. I have fled from London to avoid formal luncheons and dinners, and especially to evade model, respectable people like Mr. Barnacle. My lunch on Wednesday will be a sandwich or two in the woods by the side of the stream."

The young man did not fail to observe that an expression of relief passed over the haggard countenance of Mrs. Wilson. Hesitatingly she asked a question.

"Have you—have you come from London to attend the opening of the library on Wednesday?"

"No; I knew nothing of it. I came, as I intimated, to loaf around the fields and woods."

“Then you will not be at the ceremony ? ”

“Oh, I intend to be there, certainly, but *incog.* I am slightly interested in hearing Mr. Barnacle’s speech, and feverishly eager to learn what books have done for Bill Perkins. I shall slip into the new building and take a seat at the back, so shabbily clothed that if anyone recognises me, he will not acknowledge the acquaintanceship.”

This announcement was evidently not so welcome as his refusal of the invitation to lunch. It was plain that Mrs. Wilson was in an agony of apprehension, and Stranleigh, noticing this, went on in his most nonchalant fashion.

“ You will tell Mr. Wilson that I called, but add that it was about nothing in particular. I merely wished to let him know I should be here for a week or two ; please make it perfectly clear that his absence is of no consequence whatever. Beg him not to neglect his distinguished guest merely because I am here, and tell him that if there is anything I can do to further the festivities, he must let me know. Good-night, Mrs. Wilson. I fear I am keeping my dinner waiting up at the Manor, and thus causing my good housekeeper unnecessary anxiety. Good-night.”

She gave him a limp hand, and the young man

left with cheerful jauntiness, betraying no hint of his suspicions.

Up at the Manor-house the table had been laid, by his instructions, not in the large dining-room, but in the much smaller, snug study, of which he was rather fond. Already one telegram had arrived, and was lying beside his plate. He tore open the envelope, and read—

“Amount requisitioned by Wilson for library on Thursday, February 28th, was five thousand pounds. This being approved by you, cheque for that amount posted to Wilson, Tuesday, March 1st, and deposited by him in Cutler’s Bank, Manchester, on Thursday, March 3rd.”

When he had partaken of dinner two other telegrams arrived, which showed one advantage of being the great man of the place, for the village telegraph office was kept open, and these messages dispatched to the Manor-house after the closing hours ordained by the British Government. The telegrams showed that certain official machinery had been set in motion, in response to requests made by the Earl of Stranleigh.

There was a discreet knock at the study door.

“Can you see Mrs. Wilson, my lord?”

“Certainly; show the lady in.”

Mrs. Wilson was evidently deeply distressed, and the endeavour to conceal her agitation was only partially successful.

“I am very much worried, my lord, and that must be my apology for intruding upon you.”

“It is no intrusion at all, Mrs. Wilson. I am glad to see you again. I am accustomed to plenty of company, and the old Manor-house is lonelier than I expected. Please take this arm-chair. I can guarantee its comfort. Now, tell me what is troubling you.”

“I know nothing very definite,” she said, “and perhaps my husband could make everything clear, but he never confides in me now, and I am filled with fear. He has acted rather strangely for the past three months, being excited and irritable; not to be questioned.”

“That is only natural. This is a large estate, and its administration involves a great deal of work; then for the last three months additional labour has been placed on his shoulders in overseeing the new library.”

The woman gave a gasp, then said :

“May I ask you a question or two, my lord? It is none of my business, of course, and if it is inexpedient for me to know, you need not reply.”

"I shall answer anything you ask."

"A large cheque came to my husband about three months ago. I did not see the cheque itself, but I found the letter that accompanied it, and saw it should have been deposited in our County Bank. I have reason to believe it was deposited in Manchester, although I don't know where."

"Oh, that's all right! It was placed in Cutler's Bank, Manchester, on March 3rd."

"You knew of that, then?"

"Yes."

"The letter said the money was for the library, but I understood that Mr. Barnacle paid for the new building."

"Well, you see, Mrs. Wilson, it's a sort of co-operative affair. I gave the land, Barnacle puts up the building, and then I'm going to present the bulk of the books. Now, it is quite natural that money to put up a library should be deposited in a Manchester bank, because Manchester contains one of the most beautiful libraries in the world, built and equipped by private generosity. You evidently think something is amiss. Even if that should be so, I give you my word I shall take no action in the matter, thus, you see, there is nothing to fear.

“I noticed this evening that you seemed uneasy when I spoke of attending the function on Wednesday, and so resolved not to go. When the festivities are finished, tell your husband I called, and ask him to pay me a visit at this hour on Wednesday night, as I wish to consult him about several matters relating to the estate.”

The careworn woman departed after embarrassing him with her thanks. Stranleigh sat down again, deep in thought.

“Of course,” he said to himself, “Wilson stole the five thousand, and her warning will give him time to bolt. He can be over in France, or off to America, before a slack man like me raises a hue and cry. He’ll desert her, but I will grant her a pension, and that may be some consolation.”

Imagine Stranleigh’s astonishment when at nine o’clock on Wednesday evening he learned that Mr. Wilson wished to see him. On being shown into the study the agent bade his master a curt good-evening, but made no offer to shake hands. Without being invited, he helped himself to a chair, which he drew up to the table.

When he was announced, Stranleigh expected to meet an exaggeration of that cringing manner which always distinguished Wilson’s approach when he

knew he had done wrong, but in this again he was disappointed. The factor wore an air of bravado, not to say truculence and defiance.

"My wife says you want to see me. What for?"

"Oh, merely a little matter of curiosity on my part, Wilson," replied Stranleigh, with nonchalance. "Whose money did you steal? Barnacle's or mine?"

"That's a stupid question to ask," commented Wilson.

"You deny the theft, then?"

"I wasn't thinking of the theft; I was thinking of the question. Nobody but an ass would put it."

"Why?"

"Because Barnacle ventured three thousand pounds while you risked five thousand, therefore, as I couldn't steal both sums, I naturally secured the larger. Any fool could have told you that."

"I see. Then I'm the victim?"

"Certainly."

"Well, for cool cheek, I think that beats the record!"

"No; it is only your muddle-headedness that beats the record. With the complacency of a conceited, selfish simpleton, you force a business man like myself into an impossible position. After things

had gone so far I couldn't write to Barnacle and tell him the deal was off. I knew that any appeal to you would be futile, because reasoning doesn't appeal to a brain the calibre of yours."

"I quite understand. I think the phrase 'drivel-ling idiot' would comprise all the epithets you have hurled at me, so we'll let it go at that. Cut the cackle, and come to the 'osses. Common sense having no effect on this idiot, what did you do ? "

"I allowed an old fool to build the library, and put aside the money of the young fool until this was done, and I could safely return it to him."

"Return it !" cried Stranleigh in amazement.

"What else ? " Wilson drew a note-book from his inside pocket, extracted a cheque, and tossed the document over to Stranleigh, who opened it in dazed fashion, and saw it was payable to his order for five thousand and seventy-five pounds.

"Why the seventy-five pounds ? " he asked.

"Interest for three months at six per cent. In most of your investments you get only four, you know."

"In handing me a cheque which doubtless will be returned dishonoured, you hope to gain time, and so, as we used to say at school, make a bunk for it to the Continent. You are putting yourself

to needless trouble, Wilson. I had already determined to take no action in the matter."

" You are very good," sneered Wilson. " Truth to tell, I thought of doing as you suggest, but what with the telegraph and improved communication all over the world, I concluded it wasn't worth the risk. It would have been a joke to pull out my four hundred and fifty thousand from Cutler's Bank before this cheque was presented, but as it is, I'm buying a small estate next to your own, and investing the rest of the money in reliable securities which will give me an income even larger than I need. I'm fond of this part of the world, and love the simplicity of country life as compared with the guile and chicanery of the city."

Lord Stranleigh laughed heartily.

" Virtuous man ! " he cried. " How did you make all that money ? "

" Rubber ! " replied Wilson. " Your five thousand pounds was changed into twenty-five thousand during the first week ; sold, and re-invested ; and I continued the game almost to the present moment. Now I'm going to settle down and devote my spare time to the invention and construction of a spring wheel that will render rubber tyres useless for automobiles."

Again Stranleigh laughed.

“Speaking of the guilefulness of cities,” he said, “I have secured a two-thirds majority on the board controlling the lovely scarlet building you opened to-day. The first act will be to inaugurate an industrial school in the new edifice, and thus the land on which it stands will revert to me. Meanwhile, I shall build, with the good grey stone of our quarries, a library whose architecture will be in keeping with the village and the old church. I shall erect it facing High Street, and its grounds shall run down to the little rivulet, for I think the murmur of water is a pleasant sound to accompany the reading of a book. I shall then tear down and cart away your red-brick abomination. I’ll pay back to Barnacle his three thousand pounds with interest at ten per cent.”

“All right,” said Wilson, rising. “I cared nothing about the library from the beginning, except as a chance for making money. Meanwhile, here’s another document to complete our transaction,” and with that he handed Stranleigh his written resignation.

“Accepted,” said Stranleigh, laughing. “When you go out through the front door, mind the step, Good-night.”

CHAPTER IV.

A DISASTROUS DASH INTO THE FRAY.

LORD STRANLEIGH, rarely very exuberant, nevertheless maintained a calm, equable cheerfulness that made him exceedingly companionable. Cynical people said : “ Why shouldn’t he be cheerful, rolling in millions ? ” but it has been authoritatively stated that wealth does not bring happiness, though it is difficult to meet a man who really believes this. The afore-mentioned cynical people were wont to remark that nothing could disturb Stranleigh’s equanimity except a crease in his trousers, or a coat that set badly at the shoulders. In this they were wrong, because at times a Scotchman could seriously interfere with his poise. Indeed, Stranleigh once remarked that he believed in the good qualities of Scotchmen as much as he believed in Providence, never having seen either.

The dour Peter Mackeller, who was compounded of

many virtues, often got on Stranleigh's nerves, and when Alexander Corbitt was in one of his more obstinate moods, he could depress Stranleigh away below zero.

Stranleigh entered the large smoking-room of the Camperdown Club with the eager joyfulness of a man who had made an unexpected discovery, and wanted to talk about it, but after a quarter of an hour's conversation with Corbitt, he set down his half-smoked cigar on the ash-tray, and, leaving his glass untasted, rose to his feet.

"All right, Corbitt!" he said. "Don't worry any more about it. Sorry I inflicted my stupidity upon you. Forgive me. Good-night," and the young man who, fifteen minutes before, had entered with light step, retired a walking picture of dejection.

A wry smile twisted Corbitt's lips, but he said nothing. Behind Corbitt, in an easy, leathern arm-chair, reading his evening paper, sat a venerable gentleman with ruddy face and snow-white hair and whiskers. He seemed to be a typical English country squire, who enjoyed a good meal and sound wine. As the conversation between Corbitt and Stranleigh went on, animated at first so far as the latter was concerned, the old man's paper sank to his knees. He rested his white head

on the padded back of his chair, and quite undisguisedly listened to the talk, an ever-increasing smile lighting up his face. He was Sir George Selwyn, founder and supposedly chief shareholder of Selwyn's Bank, of which the crusty Corbitt was manager. When Stranleigh had disappeared, Sir George said quietly :—

“ Alexander, turn your chair round this way. I have been listening to your conversation, and I wish to make some comments on it.”

The usually impassive Corbitt promptly obeyed, but on this occasion could not conceal that he was startled. Sir George was about the only man on earth he deferred to, as Selwyn, being president of the bank, held Corbitt's commercial life in his hands. Sir George, however, had shown his confidence in, and even his liking for, Corbitt. It was through his influence that the younger man had been admitted into this rather particular club. Sir George, still smiling, said :—

“ Do you know the last line of a most difficult verse from Browning, which G. K. Chesterton shows to be one of the simplest ever written, and confounds us all by the explanation ? ”

“ I have no idea what you mean, Sir George.

“ Why, I thought you Scotch were a poetical

people? It's the verse about fishing the murex up, and it ends: 'What porridge had John Keats?'"

"It crossed my mind, as I listened to you and Stranleigh, that Chesterton shows how easy it is to make us all seem stupid and ignorant. You made Stranleigh look rather a fool."

"Well, Sir George, he exasperates me sometimes by asking questions that any urchin on the street could answer."

"'What porridge had John Keats?'" mused Sir George. "That question takes on a new meaning for me. Porridge is a kind of granular food, I understand, softened by heat and moisture, much favoured in the north."

"Because of its cheapness," snapped Corbitt.

"I daresay; and there is oat-cake. I tried it once at a pinch, while on a shooting excursion. It was about as hard as cast-iron and delicious as baked sawdust. Now, you were brought up on these two foods."

"I admit it," said Corbitt. "Proud of it."

"Yes; a man has a right to be proud of such endurance, but did you ever suspect that something of the hardness of oat-cake may have got into your nature?"

"It is quite possible. I hope so."

Sir George laughed.

"I see I can make no impression on you, so let us talk about Stranleigh, and about long-headed wisdom, supposed to be a Scottish quality. You have known Stranleigh for some time?"

"Yes."

"Do you always treat him as you did to-night?"

"Oh, I have had many a pleasant conversation with Stranleigh."

"Pleasant for him?"

"I hope so."

"Do you think him at all revengeful?"

"I don't exactly know what to think of him. Sometimes he seems to be a blithering idiot, and at others merely an ignorant ass."

The tolerant old man smiled inscrutably.

"I doubt your judgment and I deplore your diplomacy. If he happens to be quietly vindictive, I shouldn't like to be in your shoes. Stranleigh is the real owner of Selwyn's Bank."

Even the stolid Corbitt looked aghast at this intelligence.

"He can turn me out of the presidency whenever he wishes to do so. Judge, therefore, how insecure is your position."

Corbitt's firm jaw snapped shut, then he said sharply :

“ He may have my resignation to-morrow if he wants it.”

Sir George laughed heartily.

“ He doesn't want it, my belligerent manager. I think all he desires from you is a little civility when he asks elementary questions. With so much money in his possession, Stranleigh's chief difficulty is the finding of reasonably safe investments. He came to me some months ago to seek my advice, and to make a proposal. You must not suppose there was any surreptitious buying of stock in the bank. He arranged with me before he purchased a single share. I am to be president while I live, or until I resign. When I quit the presidency, Stranleigh has determined that you shall succeed me. He feels great confidence in you.

“ Now, Corbitt, speaking in a cautious, Scottish way, as Stranleigh can turn us both out into the street at any moment he wishes to do so, don't you think it would be wise on our part to answer very civilly whatever questions he asks, even if the subject is politics, which I know you detest ? ”

“ Sir George, I have always thought you the wisest man in London, and now I am sure of it.

Not because Stranleigh has the power to dismiss me, but through the fact that he is a very decent fellow, I shall take care in future to speak to him fair. But here he comes, quite recovered from his depression. I hope he won't discharge me before I have time to make amends."

Stranleigh advanced towards the corner where the president and manager of Selwyn's Bank sat confronting one another, both watching his approach. There was no trace of resentment on the young nobleman's face. He greeted Sir George very deferentially, then turned with a twinkle in his eye upon Corbitt.

"Alexander," he said, "I have returned to enjoy an intimate confidential chat with you on the subject of radium."

"Radium!" cried Corbitt, in amazement.

"Yes; there are seventeen questions regarding radium that I wish answered."

"Well, you've come to the wrong shop, my lord. I don't know the first thing about radium."

"That is at once astonishing and gratifying. It is astonishing that any branch of knowledge is unknown to you, and it is gratifying that you will be unable to look down upon me from the lofty pinnacle of scientific erudition."

“ I was just being lectured by Sir George here on my deficiencies. I don’t think you can better his censure, but there’s no harm in trying.”

“ My dear Corbitt ; I shouldn’t venture to censure you. I merely happened to meet Sir William Ramsay in the library, and he was extremely kind to me, settling some points about radium that I never understood before. But there is a deeper mystery than radium, which perhaps Sir William could have solved, yet I didn’t like to ask him, so I kept the question for you.”

“ All right ; fire away. I’ll answer it if I can.”

“ The mystery is, why should Sir William be so polite and courteous ? ”

“ Why shouldn’t he be ? ”

“ Because, Corbitt, he was born in Glasgow.”

Sir George Selwyn laughed so heartily that finally Corbitt joined him. Stranleigh went on seriously, unheeding the mirth.

“ I came here, Sir George, to consult with Corbitt anent my political duty during the coming election.”

“ And I,” said Corbitt, “ refuse to be consulted about a thing that doesn’t exist.”

“ What doesn’t exist ? ” demanded Stranleigh.

“ Your political duty. You haven’t any political duty except to keep out of the fight. You might

have voted in the House of Lords, but you won't have even that obligation to perform until after the election. The moment the writs are issued, you daren't open your mouth on the political situation. You must not write a letter to a candidate, and it is a criminal offence if you try to influence an elector concerning his vote. You just attempt any political duty, Lord Stranleigh, before the last poll is declared, and you may find yourself in one of His Majesty's prisons."

"Is that true, Sir George, or is he merely chaffing me?"

"True enough, Stranleigh. Until after the election you are politically the most helpless of human beings."

"You amaze me!" exclaimed Stranleigh. "I gathered through reading the newspapers that I was trampling underfoot the liberties of the free-born voters of this country; that I represented nobody, yet throttled the nation, and therefore must be swept away."

"I believe," said Sir George, "that rather accurately states the condition of things, but if I were you, Stranleigh, I wouldn't worry, and especially do I advise you not to take any steps towards the defence of your order. I think a peer, defending

the House of Peers, does more harm than good. The best plan for one in your lordship's position is to keep quiet. You have the consolation of knowing that the greatest Liberal statesman of the last century, the Right Honourable W. E. Gladstone, made no impression on the House of Lords, so I should say that this job lot of politicians is not likely to succeed where he failed."

"Oh, you mistake my point of view entirely, Sir George," replied Stranleigh, rising in his eagerness, and pacing up and down before him. "I favour the abolition of the House of Lords."

"What!" roared Corbitt in amazement.

Old Sir George held his hand open behind his ear.

"I suspect, my lord, that age is interfering with my hearing. Would you mind repeating that sentence?"

"I favour the destruction of the House of Lords as a branch of legislation."

For a few moments there was silence, then it was Corbitt who spoke.

"I must confess," he said, "that I view politics entirely from a banker's standpoint. I think as a banker, and I vote as a banker. I am opposed to turmoil and change. The House of Lords has

served us very effectually for a number of centuries, and although doubtless the peers have made mistakes, it is also true that upon occasion they gauged the popular will with more accuracy than Mr. Gladstone himself. As long as I am manager of Selwyn's Bank, I'm against any tinkering with the Constitution. All such meddling is bad for business. I'm a banker first, and a politician a long way to the rear."

"I quite agree with you, Alexander," remarked Sir George, solemnly.

Stranleigh looked from one to the other in perplexity.

"The trouble with this club," he protested, "is that its members are all of one opinion, therefore an ignorant man like myself cannot learn the other side to any question."

"My dear Stranleigh," said Corbitt, "you've been having both sides of radium, I understand."

"And of banking," added Sir George, nodding at the manager.

"My own theory," continued Corbitt, "is that there are never two sides to a question. There can't be; although a lot of fools pose as fair-minded people, and pretend to be impartial when they're merely insane. To every question there is but

one right side, and practical men do not waste time in looking at any other. In a political problem the side that makes for increase of business and stability of business is the right side.”

“Sir George signified his approval.

“It must be comfortable to feel as sure of anything as you do, Corbitt,” said Stranleigh. “If I take an opposite view about the House of Lords, my view must be wrong, I suppose ? ”

“Of course.”

Stranleigh rose, walked over to a writing-table, penned a few lines on a sheet of club paper, and returned.

“Corbitt, get that put into legal form, and I’ll sign it. It gives Sir George Selwyn and yourself complete control of Selwyn’s Bank. Thus you see any political vagaries of mine shall not be allowed to intrude themselves into the directors’-room.”

“Politically, what do you intend to do ? ” asked Sir George, gravely.

“I shall endeavour to assist the party opposed to the House of Lords.”

“Yes, but how ? ”

“I thought at first of resigning my seat in the House of Lords, and getting adopted as a candidate

by some constituency for the House of Commons, but I am told that it is impossible."

"Quite. A peer or a felon cannot enter the Commons."

"An imbecile also is prohibited," interpolated Corbitt, "so even if Stranleigh could shake off his peerage, he is still barred from the suffrages of his countrymen."

Stranleigh laughed good-naturedly at this jibe on the part of the manager, who had evidently forgotten the warning given by the venerable president.

"I daresay I shan't do very much," said Stranleigh, unperturbed. "I am too lazy. I'll try a few speeches, and when they stop me at that I'll contribute to the party funds."

"I've already told you that when the real speechifying begins you'll be compelled to turn off the tap of your eloquence. Mum's the word for a peer after the writs are issued. As to contributing, you need to be even more careful. The Corrupt Practices Act bristles with difficulties for an amateur philanthropist. Better consult a good solicitor, well versed in parliamentary law, before you exercise undue lavishness."

"Thanks, Corbitt, I will, and good-night to

you both. I must get home early and cogitate over this crisis."

The two men remained silent for some time after the young earl had taken his departure. It was Sir George who spoke first.

"There goes," he said, "the greatest danger to the Conservative Party."

"Oratory or cash?" asked Corbitt.

"Oh, his oratory will come to very little one way or another. But just imagine if he filled the war-chest of the Radicals with one million, two million or three million pounds? He could do it without feeling the loss, and the amount judiciously expended would sweep the reformers in by an overwhelming majority, merely by organisation, paid stump speakers, and thousands of motor cars on election day; all without in the least infringing on your Corrupt Practices Act."

"What an appalling prospect! Long and favourably as I have known Stranleigh, I should follow him now and sandbag him. By jove, I'll do it!" continued Corbitt, rising suddenly.

"Do what?" cried Sir George in alarm:

"I'll sandbag him."

"Nonsense, nonsense!" warned Selwyn. "Sit

down, Corbitt. Don't you become as mad in one direction as Stranleigh is in another."

Corbitt laughed.

"I'm afraid, Sir George, you do not understand the ethics of the sandbag. If you hit a man on the head with a sledge-hammer, you fracture his skull and kill him. The sandbag breaks no bones. It merely knocks the victim insensible, and then you can do what you please with him. He never knows what struck him. Now, watch me sandbag Stranleigh without leaving this room."

The manager crossed over to the writing-table at which Stranleigh had sat a few minutes before. He wrote a letter and addressed an envelope, then returned to his chief, who awaited him with anxious face.

"Lester Brent," explained Corbitt, "is by way of being a friend of mine. I have done him one or two good turns in business, and he believes a banker has no politics. He is Chairman of the Government Elections Committee. Now, hear my truthful epistle to him:—

"DEAR BRENT,—With a General Election pending, do not get alarmed at receiving a letter from an Opposition Club, but treat this communication as

private. You know I do not meddle in politics, but to-night there came to my knowledge a piece of information which I think you ought to know, for it may be very important. I have reason to believe that Earl Stranleigh of Wychwood is about to take as active a part in the coming contest as the law will allow. His almost fabulous wealth invests him with enormous power. I dare not do more than give you a hint, which is that classic quotation to the effect that you should distrust the Greeks when they bring gifts.

“Keep your eye on Stranleigh, and you may be able to trip him up.

“Ever yours,

“A. C.”

“Ah!” murmured Sir George. “Your object is to sow suspicion in the minds of the Government party?”

“Certainly. When you add that little mustard-seed to the already enormous mass of distrust against the Lords, if he were the Angel Gabriel himself poor Stranleigh could not persuade Brent he was on his side. Thus do I sandbag his lordship, who will never know who or what struck him.”

A few minutes later the missive was on its way to

the General Post Office, and was duly delivered to Lester Brent himself, being marked "Personal."

Meanwhile, Stranleigh lost no time in setting his machinery in motion, and in this was ably assisted by his secretary, Blake, who proved an indefatigable worker, and had the advantage of former experience, first as a journalist, and second as secretary to a Member of Parliament.

Stranleigh brought a fresh and original mind to bear upon politics. He realised that instant action was necessary if he meant to deliver a number of speeches before the issuing of the writs. Even with the help of Blake he could not spare the precious hours necessary to inform himself on the situation, and to write out speeches, so he hit upon the unique idea of buying his discourses ready-made. Blake undertook the task with never a doubt that he would be successful. Professional orators are notoriously short of money. The seasons when they can reap gold are few and far between, so Blake, having had dealings with the tribe in the days of his parliamentary secretaryship, assured Stranleigh that no difficulty would be met, and that he would keep his lordship's name out of the deal.

"I'll buy the speeches for myself," he said, "just as I would purchase a column article on a current

subject for a daily paper. I'll pay cash to the author, and make him sign over the copyright to me."

He hired a taxicab by the day, and called personally on all the stump speakers for the Government side then in London. He could not have chosen a better time for the purchase of eloquence, and the gratified orators themselves offered every assistance, presenting him with addresses which otherwise he would have found trouble in obtaining. Many noted speech-makers had come up from the Midlands, from the North of England, and from Scotland, to receive at headquarters their final instructions for the fray, and the energetic Blake raked them in. Several of these would not accept ready money, but insisted on cheques, which they wished to send home.

Blake, wise in his generation, would not sign cheques, so a compromise was made with money orders. He returned to Stranleigh House that night a very tired man, but there were twenty-one speeches in his possession, together with receipts making over the copyright to the young secretary. If well begun was half-done, Stranleigh's political career had opened most auspiciously, but the phrase "half-done" has more than one meaning, as Stranleigh was to learn next morning.

Ever since Corbitt's letter came into the hands of those responsible for the anti-peer campaign, Lord Stranleigh, his capable secretary, and even the dignified Ponderby, his lordship's valet, had been under strict espionage. The moment Blake developed his plan to the first man, that man, after listening and catching the drift of the scheme, apparently aided the secretary by supplying the addresses of numerous orators, but after Blake's departure there was quick work on the telephone. Headquarters was informed, and from there went out instructions to the whole list of those likely to be called on by Stranleigh's agents.

Next morning the anti-peer newspapers spread the news of the "vile plot," as they called it, over their pages and over Britain. Sign-board headlines, done in the biggest type by the blackest ink, blazoned the conspiracy of money to all the world. The head-quarters' staff of the anti-peer party completely misapprehended Stranleigh's intention. They never guessed that he purposed to deliver one or other of the speeches, but credited him with a foolhardy attempt to create an anti-peer corner in eloquence by purchasing from the speakers copyright in their lectures. The true villainy of the intrigue was made manifest when the newspapers

explained the drastic nature of the Copyright Act.

If any public man who had sold the copyright in a speech used even a single sentence of that speech while addressing an audience, he was liable to prosecution. This practically sealed the mouths of twenty-one speakers, and so forth, and so forth. The articles were lavishly illustrated by snapshots showing Blake on his hurried taxicab tour ; his getting out at one man's residence after another, and his final arrival at Stranleigh House with the loot. Pictures of the post-office orders were given, together with some appalling portraits of Lord Stranleigh himself, who, as reproduced by a rapid printing press, seemed capable of any scoundrelism.

For a week the controversy raged, and Stranleigh endured the experience of being called a knave by one half of the British Press, and a fool by the other half. Toward the end of the week it was evident that a new issue had arisen in British politics, namely, that when the Lords were done with, the millionaires would have to be taken in hand. The poor, dear, innocent British public was in danger of being corrupted by a multi-millionaire like Stranleigh.

Commercial virtue on the rampage is a potent

force in Great Britain. Publicly no man said a word in favour of Stranleigh; privately, many wished they had had a hand in his gold bag while it was being held open.

Blake, as an old pressman, wrote half a dozen letters in explanation, intended for publication, but Stranleigh refused to sign them, or allow them to be sent out.

“Don’t you know a flood when you meet it?” he asked his secretary. “This is no ‘Come-in-out-of-the-wet’ shower. Any explanation I could send out would be discredited, and besides, I don’t care a rap what people think of me. I have entered politics on a matter of principle. I’ll do the best I can without flinching, and let the heathen howl.

“So, Blake, set out at once, and engage the biggest hall you can get hold of: the Crystal Palace, Albert Hall, Olympia, or anything that happens to be vacant next week. The writs may be out any day, and there’s no time to lose. I’m going to deliver the best of those speeches, and I will tell the audience who wrote it, what I paid for it, and why. I’ll tell them I want both cash and credit to go to the right man. Announce by big advertisements in the papers on both sides of politics that the Earl of

Stranleigh, at such a hall, and at such an hour, will address the public on the present political crisis."

Blake, who knew more than Stranleigh about political gatherings, protested against this plan, and the moment it became public all Stranleigh's friends wrote, telegraphed, telephoned, and endeavoured to see him and convince him of his folly, but without avail. No one would consent to be chairman, nor even to sit on the platform with him, so the chairs were cleared away, and the packed audience, just on the hour of eight, saw appear before them a well-set-up, good-natured looking young man, arrayed most becomingly in a fashionable evening suit.

At first there was a Homeric burst of laughter, and then a roar, as if all the African animals Roosevelt had met gave simultaneous voice. Stranleigh stood there smiling, waiting for the hubbub to cease, but it grew louder and louder. Had the young nobleman been better versed in testing the temper of a public meeting, he would have recognised the ominous signs which indicated there was soon to be a tremendous row. His cool demeanour seemed to infuriate the huge audience, and most uncomplimentary epithets were hurled at him from all sides.

Behind Stranleigh appeared a police officer, who was greeted with a roar of defiance.

"You must come with me," the officer shouted in his ear. "You can't get in a word to-night. They're going to rush the platform presently, and then we may have difficulty in saving you. Come along."

"Let them rush," replied Stranleigh. "If they won't listen, this is no country of free speech."

"Come along," insisted the officer. "There is no time for argument."

"Do you arrest me?"

"Certainly not."

"Then get off this platform. It belongs to me to-night."

The policeman disappeared, then, with an overwhelming tornado of sound, the mob surged toward the stage, rather impeded by its own compactness.

The first to reach the front was a stalwart, bullet-headed, thick-necked ruffian, with hair as closely cropped as that of a convict. Placing two enormous hands on the edge of the platform he sprang up in front of Stranleigh, but before his equilibrium was complete, Stranleigh planted a well-directed blow square between the eyes, and the rioter, flinging up his hands, fell backwards with a crash on his followers.

The sharp report of the impact cut the turmoil like a bullet, and was followed by dense silence.

“Send me up another,” shouted Stranleigh.

“You didn’t give him a chance,” retorted one of the crowd.

“What chance have I,” cried Stranleigh, “against five thousand roughs, each one so cowardly that he daren’t come alone? I’ve always understood there was fair play among the lower orders. Send me up your best man if you dare.”

The growl of hatred began again, but the great close-cropped bullet-head on the thick neck became visible above the platform.

“A clean pat like that,” bellowed the prize-fighter, “hurts no man. It was straight from the shoulder, too. What his lordship says is right. You’re giving him no sporting odds!” Then, turning his back on the now subdued audience, he said in a most respectful voice to Stranleigh :

“Will you let me get my feet on them boards?”

“Of course,” cried the young man. “Give me your hand.”

The pugilist, evidently a bit dazed, in spite of his brave words, held up his hand. Stranleigh grasped it, with a powerful pull hoisting him on the

platform, then, without releasing his hand, he shook it cordially.

“Pleased to meet an honourable opponent,” he said.

“Same to you, my lud,” and there arose a hearty cheer with no venom in it, succeeded by quick silence, all eyes intent on the stage. The pugilist threw off coat and waistcoat, and displayed himself in a woollen shirt, a leathern belt, and trousers.

“Going to strip, my lud?”

“No.”

“Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

Stranleigh got in the first blow, and, quickly following it, the second. The other shook his head, as if a fly tormented him. Again his lordship tried to get in two strokes, but they were warded off. His opponent was measuring him.

Stranleigh had often met and defeated brute strength, but now he realised that planted so sturdily before him was brute strength augmented by great skill. Nevertheless, he delivered a terrible blow above the heart that caused his opponent to gasp and give ground.

The young earl followed up his advantage with a relaxation of his customary caution, expecting

to get in another blow before the rally, but the pugilist flung himself upon him. Stranleigh's feet rose from the platform, and then he fell full length on his back and lay motionless.

A wild yell from the audience was quickly checked by the upraised hand of the standing combatant. He seemed to exercise a sort of hypnotic influence over the mob, as he enunciated, very slowly :

“ One—two—three — four—five—” Stranleigh’s prone head moved from one side to the other, “ six—seven—” With a long drawn-out sigh the prostrate man painfully rose to a sitting posture, and then, uncertainly, to his feet. A touch would have sent him over again.

“ Had enough, my lud ? ”

“ What did you say ? ”

“ Had enough ? ”

The younger man smiled.

“ Why, no.” He pronounced his words with a sort of precise selection as if not quite sure of them. “ Why, no ; I take it we are just beginning.”

“ Good man ! You don’t mind if I fan you a bit ? ” but there was to be no fanning. With inexplicable suddenness Stranleigh, whose dress coat was split down the back, found himself surrounded by a dozen policemen.

“Sorry, my lord,” said the officer, “but this time I must arrest you.”

The storm of rage rising from that audience was unlike anything Stranleigh had yet heard. The police attempted to hustle their prisoner away, but the pugilist shouted :

“There’s no danger !”

“Stay where you are,” he roared to the crowd, “and give a cheer for his ludship !” Then he thrust his way among the police, and grasped Stranleigh’s hand.

“Pleased to have met you, my lud,” he said, in the midst of the cheering. “Do you want me, too ?” he asked the officer, who growled :

“Oh, we know where to find *you!*” and then Stranleigh disappeared from the political arena.

Very few of the British newspapers had a good word to say for Lord Stranleigh next morning, or even an excuse to offer for his conduct. The anti-peer journals were extremely bitter. Was this lunatic to be left longer at liberty merely because he was rich and possessed a title ? First, he had endeavoured, with the weight of money, to corrupt those pure angels of light, the speech-making politicians. Finding that impossible, he provoked a public display of brutality such as had not been

seen in peace-loving England since the contest between Heenan and Sayers. They demanded that a stern example should be made of the brawler.

But, of course, everyone knew that no example would be made. The law is very lenient towards election rows. Were it otherwise the Courts would be kept busy for a year following an appeal to the people. Two days after Stranleigh's pugilistic contribution to the conduct of the Empire the writs were issued for the General Election, and all well-wishers of the young nobleman breathed a sigh of deep relief. He was now prohibited by law from taking any part in the approaching struggle.

Yet so democratic was his lordship, and so anxious that the Cause of the People should prevail, that he incurred the risk of a third interference, which shall be but briefly described. After the knock-out blow he had received, and his subsequent release on bail, our amateur politician, under the advice of his doctor, took a rest cure. It was the physician's hope that he would be able to keep Stranleigh in bed during the fortnight that the election lasted.

It is always unsafe to prophesy what Demos will do, and the polling of the first three days went decidedly against the Government, giving ominous signs of a landslide; signs the more disquieting

because the Government itself had the choice of the constituencies contested, and naturally selected those supposed to be most favourable to the cause it represented.

On the first day Stranleigh shook off his doctor ; on the second he made certain financial arrangements ; on the third, carrying a small handbag which he never allowed out of his possession, he entered his most powerful motor-car. With his favourite chauffeur in front, and Blake beside him in the back seat, he made for a manufacturing town in the north, where a prominent and plain-spoken member of the Cabinet was to hold forth that night on the political situation, in the largest hall the manufacturing town contained.

In the district surrounding this hall the streets were packed, and there was much difficulty in making progress with the automobile. In addition, the crowd was palpably in an ugly temper. Getting as near as possible to the stage entrance of the building, Stranleigh and Blake left the car, the former carrying his small handbag. At the door they were stopped, but the doorkeepers accepted Stranleigh's card, and sent it in to the committee-room. It was promptly brought back by someone evidently in authority.

“ Which of you is Lord Stranleigh ? ” he asked.

“ I am,” answered the bearer of that title.

The name passed from man to man, running over the menacing mob like a zig-zag flash of electricity.

“ The right honourable gentleman refuses to see you, and personally I advise you to get away from here as speedily as you can. In the first place, you have no right to meddle with a political meeting, and in the second place, our people here are less patient, gentle, and lamb-like than was your audience in London.”

“ Thank you for the warning,” said Stranleigh. “ I’ll go away at once if you will take this bag to the Minister, ask him to open it in the privacy of his own room, examine the documents it contains, and if he thinks they are of any use to him in this contest, to deal with them as he sees fit.”

“ What you suggest is impossible, my lord. The Minister declined to have any dealings whatever with you.”

“ Bash him ! ” roared the crowd, as the official disappeared, and bash him they did. The police were unable to save him on this occasion, but two of them dragged his senseless body into the motor-car, while others of the force kept back the throng as best they could. All the time Stranleigh’s right



“ ‘ I feel,’ said Stranleigh weakly, ‘ as if I had been sand-bagged.’ ”

Lord Stranleigh, Philanthropist]

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hand clung to the handle of the small bag. The syren operated by the chauffeur more or less cleared a way for the automobile, and at a good deal of risk to life and limb, he managed to get into a side street, and from thence to the hospital.

The nurses who attended Stranleigh listened to his ravings about the Will of the People, which he seemed anxious should prevail, also about a million pounds in Bank of England notes that rested somewhere in a handbag.

One afternoon he came to his senses, and saw Blake standing beside his bed.

“Hello, Blake!” he said feebly, “how goes the election?”

“Oh, entirely to your satisfaction!” but Blake did not think it necessary to tell him that the contest had ended more than a week before.

“There was a little handbag, Blake——”

“That’s all right,” interrupted the secretary. “Its contents are in the Bank of England, and I hold the receipt. Now, you mustn’t ask any more questions. How do you feel?”

“I feel,” said Stranleigh weakly, “as if I had been sand-bagged.”

CHAPTER V.

WHEN SPADES WERE TRUMPS.

FIVE HUNDRED POUNDS OFFERED.

A MAN of leisure, possessing ample means, a portion of which he desires to use in any plan of betterment that may commend itself to him, wishes to avail himself of outside suggestions, being disappointed in the results of past endeavour on his own initiative. Will pay five hundred pounds sterling to any person furnishing a practical idea ; an idea which, when carried out, will prove beneficial to humanity. No personal interview can be accorded in any circumstances. Competitors must abide by the decision of the man who pays the money. Address Berkim and Duncannon, Solicitors, Old Jewry, London, E.C.

THE above advertisement had appeared in all the leading newspapers of Great Britain, and now

Lord Stranleigh was standing the brunt of it. He had let loose a white avalanche upon himself. Every postman brought in a sackful of letters forwarded from London, and some of them brought two. These communications, by order of Blake, were dumped in a corner of the large parlour one stair up, whose broad balcony overlooked the sea.

Stranleigh, his two hands deep in his trousers pockets, gazed at the ever-increasing heap with an expression of dismay.

“If this keeps on much longer, Blake,” he said, “we’ll have the police down on us, certain that we are engaged in some fraudulent enterprise. It is only an arrant swindle that can call out such an immediate and voluminous response from the gullible British public.”

“Five hundred pounds is a tempting bait, my lord,” said Blake, who, knees on the floor, was making an ineffectual effort to sort out the letters.

“I suppose it is, yet it seems amazing that so small an amount should produce such an appalling result. If I’d advertised for someone to lend me five hundred pounds, I don’t suppose the population would be tumbling over one another, anxious to accommodate me, although this is a rich country.”

“Oh, I’m not so sure of that,” replied the

philosophic Blake. "If you advertised in your own name, you could get all the money you demanded. To him that hath shall be given."

"In my own name, yes. That's just the trouble. The secrecy I had hoped to preserve is itself suspicious. I feel the all-seeing eye of the post-office upon me, and I dread the police-station."

"You don't need to dread it," cried Blake, as he rose upstanding, and brushed the knees of his trousers, abandoning his task in despair. "I'm the person who would bear the brunt. These letters are all re-directed to me. This house is leased in my name. I beg you to observe that the solicitors in London have abandoned the task of re-directing by hand, and the later letters are all decorated by a rubber stamp, bearing the words: 'E. J. Blake, Saltwater House, Marine Parade, Lyme Regis.' No," concluded the flippant Blake, "the aristocracy in this case goes scathless, and it's me for the prison cell, as my American friends remark."

"My dear Blake, if you'd read less American slang, and peruse, as I do, the classics of our own time, *par example*, 'The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes,' you would comprehend the inadequacy of such protection as you offer me. The post-office department, besides acting as our modern argosy

is also a modern Argus (forgive the attempted pun). When it turns any of its hundred eyes upon the sudden augmentation of letters all re-addressed from London to one man at Lyme Regis, and calls in Sherlock Holmes, he will merely give a glance at E. J. Blake, and seeing his naïve, innocent cherubic face, will instantly pass him by, and speedily discover the real villain of the piece."

"I rather imagine," encouraged Blake, "that this plethora of letters will soon dwindle away, and then cease."

They were both startled by a sharp double knock at the drawing-room door, the way from the street being left open so that the postal emissaries could come right up the stair without a preliminary use of the front knocker. A postman and two assistants entered, each carrying a well-filled bag, the contents of which visibly augmented the mountain on the floor. The postman, standing erect, mopped his brow with a handkerchief, sighed deeply, and paused as if to gather strength for the return.

Stranleigh put his hand in his pocket, and drew out several golden sovereigns, which he presented to the postman.

"I wish," he said, "you'd divide that among all those who are doing this extra work."

The postman gratefully accepted, and with his two assistants, retired.

“That’s bribery,” said Blake, severely, “and will add considerably to your sentence.”

“No, it is merely acting on the text ‘the labourer is worthy of his hire.’ Besides, if generous tips are to be earned, these men won’t complain of the extra work. Now, Blake, what do you propose we should do? Engage a selection committee, and set them at the work of opening these communications?”

“I think not. Too much publicity; too little efficiency. The task is less formidable than it seems. I’ll sit down at this table, and cut open letter after letter. A mere glance at each will show whether anything original is put forward. I imagine that the bulk of this correspondence can be classified in the ‘begging letter’ category, with which a capacious waste-paper basket may deal.”

Blake picked up one of the letters, tore it open, scrutinised it for a moment, and tossed it aside.

“There you have it,” he said. “If you place at the disposal of the writer the amount you wish to expend, he will distribute it among the deserving, after making personal investigation of their worth.

For this service he will charge no salary, providing the five hundred pounds reward is sent to him by return."

"Generous man! Nevertheless, the waste-paper basket yawns."

There came another knock at the door, and a boy handed in four of the London morning papers, which showed that it was just past eleven o'clock in the forenoon. Blake took the journals and gave them to Stranleigh.

"If you will seat yourself in that comfortable arm-chair on the balcony, and read the news, I'll see what impression I can make on this pile during the next two hours."

Had Stranleigh, instead of opening his morning papers, gazed to the west, he would have seen part of the water-front of the most picturesque, unfashionable, and unconventional seaside resort in England. Towards the end of the Parade, the Cobb made a sort of climax to it, Cobb being Lyme's name for a very stout wharf or breakwater which sticks out into the Channel, and then turns to the east, enclosing a little harbour. No one knows when the Cobb was first built, although it is mentioned in a document bearing the date 1313, a doubly unlucky year, if we believe the superstition

of its figuring, but the Cobb never can become ancient, because the wild sea sweeps it away every now and then, after which it must be rebuilt by the persevering British.

Alongside of it landed the unfortunate Duke of Monmouth, who so went inland to his defeat and his beheading, and on its granite surface a dozen followers of his were hanged. Great things have happened on the Cobb, both in history and in fiction ; one as real nowadays as the other. The Cobb might be called the A.B.C. of the novelist, for Jane Austen, Walter Besant, and Conan Doyle refer to doings there or thereabouts in their respective books, "Persuasion," "'Twas in Trafalgar's Bay," and "Micah Clarke."

When the bells of the town struck twelve, Stranleigh looked through the open window at his absorbed secretary, who sat like a statue in a heap of discarded letters which he had thrown over his shoulder one by one, as he viséed them. He now rested his elbow on the table, and was perusing some closely-written foolscap sheets.

"Well, Blake," cried Stranleigh, "have you struck oil at last?"

"I rather think so," he replied, rising, and with his feet shuffling the loose *débris* to another

corner of the room. Then stepping out on the balcony, he took a seat opposite his chief.

“ This man,” he said, “ seems to be a literary person, who begins his letter in blank verse :—

“ ‘ O masters, lords and rulers in all lands,
 How will the Future reckon with this Man ?
 How answer his brute question in that hour
 When whirlwinds of rebellion shake the world ?
 How will it be with kingdoms and with kings—
 With those who shaped him to the thing he is—
 When this dumb terror shall reply to God,
 After the silence of the centuries ? ’

“ ‘ Your advertisement states that you wish to benefit humanity. I claim no originality for my suggestion, but the time that has elapsed since it was first mooted gives you an opportunity of applying to it modern methods and modern thought, discarding what you may deem cumbrous, and adding improvements from the knowledge of to-day. For encouragement, I ask you to read Rudyard Kipling’s poem, “ Pharaoh and the Sergeant ” :—

“ ‘ Said England unto Pharaoh, “ I must make a man
 of you
 That will stand upon his feet and play the game ” ;

and the poem goes on to show how the Sergeant

made a rifleman from mud, “drilled a black man white and made a mummy fight.”

“‘ If an Englishman, as is proven, attain such success with the semi-savage, ignorant Egyptian, in preparing him for the destructive art of war, how much more effective should be the result if an Englishman took his derelict fellow citizens and trained them in the arts of peace, and if in doing so he taught Great Britain the way to become self-sustaining in the matter of food, how much greater would be his claim to our gratitude.

“‘ I find in chapter twelve of Robert Blatchford’s book, “*Britain for the British*,” that one acre of our land yields twenty-eight bushels of wheat, while the same amount of land in certain parts of the United States gives eighty-seven to a hundred and fifteen bushels. Minnesota raises thirty-one tons of potatoes to the acre, while on the same surface Great Britain produces only six tons. Eight-and-a-half bushels of wheat will feed one man for a year. By intensive culture, Major Hallet raised that amount of wheat on one-twentieth of an acre ; that is, an acre produced the almost incredible quantity of a hundred and seventy bushels.

“‘ My proposal is this. Purchase fifty acres of fertile land, which just now is cheap enough even

in the vicinity of towns. Erect upon this land a quadrangular building, after the general plan of a monastery or an Oxford college. The side towards the road should be two storeys high, containing a hall, seating comfortably fifty men, a library, a dining-room, kitchens and everything pertaining thereto, a billiard-room, and a bowling alley, all fully equipped. The other three sides of the quadrangle should be occupied by a building one storey in height, the roof of the inner side coming down to form round three sides of the quadrangle a verandah or cloister, the ends of which communicate by doors with the main building. These wings are to hold forty or fifty small apartments of two rooms each; one man, one apartment.

“ ‘ Divide the property into plots, which may measure anything you like, from forty feet square to an acre. In the first instance I suggest choosing forty unmarried men, human derelicts, but men not more than fifty years old, sound in wind and limb; in other words, men who can work if they want to. I’d give each a plot of land and shelter, with free board for at least a year, furnishing him also with a spade and whatever other horticultural implements the head-gardener considered needful.

“ ‘ So far as drink is concerned, pure water and

good sound beer would be provided. I should prefer not less than ten per cent. of the men to be habitual drunkards, and any other vice such as thieving, foul language, combativeness, and so forth, would be welcomed in moderation, for our object is to learn whether or not a mud Englishman can be formed into a man.

“ ‘ The staff I should select with great care, insisting on honesty, strict temperance, and all the virtues that can be obtained for good pay. I consider very important the retaining of an expert accountant, who would set down all incomings and outgoings. The manager ought to be a clear-headed business man free from fads, and the instructing gardener thoroughly competent and up-to-date. Within a year you would be able to show what can be done with the land, and what with the men on the land.

“ ‘ Prince Kropotkin says that by one day’s labour, on one-twentieth of an acre, one man can produce a year’s bread for one man ; that is, eight-and-a-half bushels of wheat. Adopting this as a basis to go on, a plan carrying out my suggestion might do the double duty of solving the question of the unemployed, and proving that England can feed herself without foreign assistance.

“ ‘ Yours sincerely, STILLSON CRANE.’ ”

Blake looked up from his reading, and saw that Lord Stranleigh was gazing dreamily out at the blue Channel, probably not listening to the end of the long letter.

“I’m afraid,” he ventured, “that this does not interest you.”

His lordship woke up with a smile.

“Oh, yes, it does, but it is merely Robert Owen’s township community plan over again, or Fourier’s system of phalanges uncomplicated by the family question.”

“Then it has been tried before?”

“In a sort of way, yes, but never by a man of sense like myself.”

“You think you could do the trick?”

“I’m perfectly certain that I couldn’t.”

“Oh! Why?”

“Because there is a missing ingredient that I am not allowed to use, while the Sergeant in Kipling’s poem was given that liberty. Kipling’s intensely practical mind, an odd quality in a poet, indicates the vital point, and as you finished the letter I was just trying to remember those lines in the poem which hit the nail on the head. I cannot remember the first line, but the second, third and fourth were something like this:—

“ ‘ There was faith and hope and whacking and despair,
While the Sergeant gave his orders and he combed
old Pharaoh out,
And England didn’t look to know or care.’ ”

“ Isn’t it ‘ While the Sergeant gave his cautions ’ ? ”
suggested Blake.

“ Perhaps it is. It’s the whacking and the
combing I’m thinking of, and the line :

“ ‘ Translated by a stick (which is really half the trick).’ ”

“ It’s a good deal more than half the trick. England wouldn’t allow us to comb these derelicts out. The Sergeant had a great advantage over me. He worked in a silent desert, under the burning sun. I’d have to work in gossipy, prying, interfering England, under the rules of the County Council or the Local Government Board, which are worse than any tropical sun that ever struck a man with heat apoplexy. I might possess Roosevelt’s big stick, but I should not be permitted to use it. Our phrase ‘ Are we down-hearted ? ’ should be changed into ‘ Are we soft-hearted ? ’ Yes, and soft-headed. The answer is found in the old rhyme ‘ We are, we are, we are.’ ”

“ Then this scheme is N.G. ? Mr. Stillson Crane,
of Manchester, doesn’t get the five hundred pounds ? ”

"Oh, I didn't say that. I have always desired to build a monastery, and this idea of peopling it with secular monks, some of whom can steal and swear, rather appeals to me. I feel a sneaking admiration and envy of the lives lived by those monks who usefully toiled in the soil, and who taught ignorant peasants the intensive culture of their day. I frequently take a few moments off to curse the vandals who destroyed English monasteries, and bereft our land of an architectural heritage so lovely. But let us get down to business. We are now at the beginning of September: could such a monastery as this man indicates be completed by the first of April, which strikes me as a most appropriate date?"

"I see no reason why it shouldn't," replied Blake.

"My Dorsetshire estate, ten miles away, could easily spare fifty acres, and its soil is good. I'll erect my phalanstery there. Now, Blake, you'll need to get busy. We've never before built a monastery, so we must select an architect who can unite exterior beauty with interior usefulness, and set him at the plans as speedily as possible."

"Whom do you suggest?" asked Blake.

"I've no suggestion to make. I don't know

enough about the subject. We must have authoritative advice. Write to the editor of the *British Architect* and he will name the best man for the job. Meanwhile, get in touch with Stillson Crane, of Manchester, and invite him to Lyme Regis. You and I will change places. I become the private secretary, you the capitalist. An interview with Crane will show us whether or not he is a practical man. The line in his letter about getting a manager without fads impresses me in his favour, and if personal contact supports that impression, you will make arrangements for him to be superintendent."

Blake noted down these particulars on the back of the Manchester man's letter, then he said :

"If Crane is the capable man you expect him to be, he will very soon learn that you are the capitalist, and not I."

"I don't think so. I shall prove a much more courteous, deferential private secretary than you are, but in any case you will see him first, and report to me. Perhaps it would not be advisable for me to meet him at all, for I will now confess something that may surprise you. I intend devoting next spring and summer to the rôle of human derelict.

I shall occupy two rooms in my phalanstery. I shall wield a spade under the eye of the gardening instructor."

" You won't stick to it for a week."

" There you go ! I should never say so rude a thing as that to my employer. You see, Blake, I shall be the most unskilful of the derelicts gathered under the wing of the Crane. I produce as little that is useful as any one of this chain gang, but I consume more than a thousand of them put together. I am myself a problem that England must solve in the near future. My fellow tramps consume merely beer and sausages and mashed, when they can get these delicacies, but I'm a purple and fine linen vagabond, equally useless and much more destructive. I've never garnered eight-and-a-half bushels of wheat of my own growing, nor dug up six tons of potatoes, yet, in spite of your sneer regarding my early quitting, I'll bet you a sovereign that, to use a horticultural simile, I shall prove the last rose of summer left blooming alone when my vagrant companions have stamped and gone."

" I'm not a betting man," said Blake. " Now, what about this heap of letters ? If Crane gets

the five hundred, it will be unnecessary to read further."

"Not so, my dear Blake. You cannot evade your duties by any such plea as that. Every letter must at least be glanced at, and if there are other suggestions that please me, I will pay the promised price for them."

"I don't see where I am to get the time."

"You'll be busy for a week or two while plans are being drawn, and contracts let, but after that the long winter is at your disposal. There goes the luncheon bell. Let us to our trenchers. This sea air has made me hungry."

* * * *

As a matter of fact the new monastery was inaugurated on the first of March, instead of the first of April. The instructing gardener had informed his ignorant employer that April was altogether too late in the year to begin horticultural work. He himself, with a staff of hired labourers, set to work in the middle of February making preparations for the campaign, ploughing the land that was to produce three hundred and forty bushels of wheat, that is, eight-and-a-half bushels for each man, to be grown in a field of fourteen acres, since the head gardener scouted the idea of each man

raising his own quantity of wheat on his own small allotment.

The men were all chosen from London, and a motley crew they were, none of them familiar with gardening or with country life. Stranleigh, dressed in corduroy and fustian, made a quite perfect theatrical labouring man who would have delighted the heart of a London stage-manager, but would have deceived a farmer not for one moment. Blake had seen to it that apartment number one was allotted to Stranleigh, number one being the two rooms next to the main building on the right hand side, thus Blake could call upon his chief without going down the cloisters and passing any other apartment.

Stillson Crane was a middle-aged man of most benevolent appearance. His long beard, which had once been black, was now tinged with grey. One could guess he was a lover of his fellow-men not only by his benign expression, but by his clothes of solemn black, which fitted him so badly. He possessed the gift of tongues, and was a most eloquent exhorter. Indeed, if the forty had followed the counsels of their Ali Baba, they would have been much more model citizens than they were.

The head gardener was a man who knew his

business, but who speedily found that the business he had learned was not that which he was compelled chiefly to exercise. His principal duty proved to be keeping the men at work, because the moment he disappeared from one side of the building, the amateur horticulturists dropped their spades, filled up clay pipes, and, the better to enjoy their smoke, sat in a row with their backs against the phalanstery, ready to jump up in a hurry when a whistled signal warned them that the gardener was approaching.

Nevertheless, for the first week everything went on with reasonable smoothness, then the result of regular meals and excellent food began to exercise an effect. All hunger-cringing had departed from the men, and Stranleigh, who studied his fellow-workers with unobserved eagerness, regarded this as a good sign. They were standing on their feet, as the poet said, and would soon be ready to play the game. The game, however, developed through three crises ; first, the tobacco crisis, then the drink crisis, and lastly the financial crisis.

Although Stranleigh occupied two rooms furnished exactly like all the others, and although he partook of the same food, with people from whom he instinctively shrank, he allowed himself one luxury ; several boxes of good cigars that Blake had pro-

cured for him, and which were hidden under the bed. One evening, after supper, as the young man sat in his room reading, and enjoying his cigar, the door suddenly opened, and a rather forbidding-looking ruffian, known as Bert Harrison, entered. Harrison had proved himself an expert work-shirker, whose allotment was the most backward in the community. He was something of a politician, and already exercised a good deal of influence upon his fellows. He harangued them, on occasion, over a mug of beer, pointing out how the country should be governed.

Stranleigh threw down his book and rose to his feet.

"I beg your pardon," he said mildly, "but I didn't hear you knock."

"Right you are, mate," cried Bert, affably. "Don't need to worry about that, because I didn't knock. We're all comrades here, you know."

"I shouldn't think of entering your room without knocking," persisted Stranleigh.

"Oh, wouldn't you? It 'ud be all the same to me. Friend of mine is welcome, however he comes. But then, you see, I come official. I'm a delegation. What the brethren wants to know is where you get them cigars you smoke."

“ I got them in London before I came here. Will you have one ? ”

Harrison accepted thankfully, lit the weed, and expressed his satisfaction.

“ This is a bit of all right ! ” he cried admiringly. “ This ain’t no twopenny smoke. How much do they cost ? ”

“ I’m sure I haven’t the slightest idea, ” replied Stranleigh.

A broad smile illuminated the face of Bert Harrison. He expressed his enlightenment with a wink.

“ Don’t you fear, mate, ” he said. “ No questions asked, but you do know how to pick out the goods. I thought them white, ladylike fingers of yours was made for something nippier than handling a spade. Well, talking about delegations, I’m asked by the comrades to make a strike for tobacco. Do you think old ‘ Longbeard ’ will come down ? ”

“ I shouldn’t wonder, if it’s put to him nicely.”

“ That’s just the point, and so we thought you’d be the best man to do the chinning. There’s five of us going in to see him now, and we want you to be spokesman.”

“ I don’t mind. Tell me exactly what the demand is.”

“ Well, tobacco’s just as much a necessity of

life as beer is. The stuff the boys brought with them from London is all gone, and we've got no money to buy more, so the lads are hungry for a smoke."

"I'm willing to put the case before Mr. Crane, but I rather think the head gardener may object."

"Why?"

"From some remarks he made in the field, he seems to think tobacco interferes with work."

"Oh, blow the work!" said Harrison. "If he objects, we want you to talk him down. This state of things is cruel 'ard on smoking men. Even when a man gets into the workhouse he's allowed tobacco."

"Where's your delegation?"

"They're waiting outside."

"All right! Come along: we'll tackle old Crane."

Crane, Blake, and the gardener received the committee, and Stranleigh placed before them the case for the smoker. Crane said nothing at first, but to Stranleigh's astonishment, the gardener spoke in favour of the men.

"I think," he said, "that at least an ounce of tobacco should be allowed to each man per day, but I want to superintend its distribution. I tell you what it is, men, those who do not do their share of work, will not get their share of tobacco."

There was some grumbling at this, but Bert Harrison, in a bluff, manly way, accepted the proposition, and thus the delegation filed outside where Bert's four comrades at once rounded on him, and complained bitterly of his supineness in agreeing to a condition so drastic.

"Why, you fatheads," said the leader with unconcealed contempt, "don't you see that for forty men they'll get the tobacco down from London wholesale? That's all we need. Mentioning no names, there's them among us can pinch enough tobacco to give every man his share, gardener or no gardener," and once more he winked at Stranleigh.

This completely satisfied the delegation, who felt ashamed that so evident a solution had not occurred to them. The truth of Bert's remark was borne in upon Stranleigh when he rose next morning, and found that his boxes of cigars had been stolen during the night.

In spite of Crane's indefatigable efforts, it was evident that the men loathed the country more and more as time went on. A grand piano had been provided in the lecture-hall, on which at times Blake performed very admirably. A huge phonograph gave all the popular selections of the day, and

occasionally Crane delivered moral lectures on self-help, on the uplift, and what-not, but speedily found himself without an audience when the men learned that attendance was not compulsory. These entertainments proved to be as inadequate a substitute for a low-down East-End music-hall as sugared lemonade is to take the place of whisky on the palate of a confirmed drunkard.

When at last it became necessary to place a restriction on the consumption of beer, a demand was made for stronger drink, and this being refused, the men went on strike for a day and a half, succumbing at the end of that time through force of hunger, for it was "No work, no meals," a ukase which Harrison characterised as exceeding the vilest tyranny of Russia. Were they men, or were they not? The authorities, ably aided by the cook, appeared to think they were not.

The failure of this strike secured quietness and reasonable obedience for about ten days. Then an emeute occurred that nearly brought about the closing of the phalanstery. One afternoon the men deserted in a body, and made for Lyme Regis. It was now the month of April, and the country was looking lovely, but although Browning wrote—

“Oh to be in England,
Now that April’s there,”

it is not insisted by anyone that these men journeyed forth to enjoy the beauties of Nature. Country caution was no match for City cleverness, and in some manner, during their journey, the pilgrims accumulated money, which they used in purchasing the strong waters of Lyme Regis, to such effect that four of them were locked away by the town constable. Blake, who followed in a motor-car, paid the fines and costs next morning.

Later the magistrates investigated the phalans-tery, but, influenced by the obvious good intentions of the reverend-looking Crane, they did nothing except warn him that if a similar outbreak took place, the establishment would be compulsorily closed. Thefts were reported along the route, and although no proofs were forthcoming, Blake placed in the hands of the magistrates a cheque for the amount alleged to have been stolen.

The men next demanded that a certain amount of pocket-money should be dealt them, which request was acceded to, and a week later they made a strike for regular wages of not less than four shillings a day. They complained that really they had been working for nothing on somebody’s land for some-

body's benefit. These wages were refused, and Crane endeavoured to explain to the men the object of this self-help community, but the meeting broke up in disorder, and the earnest man was not listened to.

The forty promptly struck work, but once more were overcome by starvation, and although Bert Harrison declared this to be a favourite weapon of the capitalist, and offered to lead a raid upon the larder, the strike had gone too far. The hungry men knew that they could secure a meal, beer and tobacco at once if they gave in, so to Bert's chagrin, they paid as little attention to his eloquence as they had to Crane's, and surrendered on the terms that a meal should be served forthwith. Having fed sumptuously, and drunk to their satisfaction, they instantly inaugurated their final strike.

All except Stranleigh were gathered in the central hall, when they gave their ultimatum to Crane, who was on the verge of tears. They began proceedings by great stamping of feet, and by singing in lusty chorus the song—

“Eight hours’ work,
Eight hours’ play,
Eight hours’ sleep, and
Eight shillings a day.”

When Stillson Crane, E. J. Blake, and the gardener took their places on the platform they were received with boisterous cheers, arising from plenty of good food and a sufficient quantity of beer.

Bert Harrison was the spokesman. He demanded immediate payment for each man of eight shillings for every day they had put in at this workhouse, as he called it, also conveyances to take them to the station, and their fares to London. Poor Crane, who could scarcely control his voice, answered briefly that he had resigned his position, and, washing his hands of the whole affair, sat down. There was a great uproar at this, and charges of bad faith were hurled at the ex-manager, but Bert Harrison calmed the storm, and said if their terms were not instantly accepted, they would proceed to destroy the building after helping themselves to its contents.

Blake rose and said curtly—

“ You will now be addressed by one of yourselves ; the man who can at once grant your request or refuse it. I beg to introduce Earl Stranleigh of Wychwood, owner of this estate, and builder of this house.”

There now mounted the platform a young man most exquisitely dressed. The uniform of the

phalanstery had been discarded for the costume of Piccadilly. The audience was too amazed to vociferate. They had not observed until Blake spoke that one of their number was missing, and it was some moments before they recognised that the immaculate person who confronted them was their late fellow-worker.

“Gentlemen,” began Stranleigh, in his most conciliatory voice, but Harrison sprang to his feet.

“So this is the secret of the good cigars——”

“That were stolen? Yes,” said Stranleigh, with a smile.

“Never mind about that, my fine cock-a-doodle-doo. Before we allow you to speak, will you agree to give us eight shillings a day, and railway fare?”

“Yes,” replied Stranleigh suavely, “if you force me to do so.”

“We do force you.”

“That is courageous,” said Stranleigh, “when you realise that double your number of policemen surround this building. I am told that some of you are wanted very badly by the authorities, and I think you foolish to leave shelter and safety to go out once more into the cruel world. If you insist on eight shillings a day I shall of course accede to your request.”

“ We do insist,” declared Harrison, but in a much less truculent voice. There were no answering cheers behind him ; the word “ police ” seemed to have paralysed Bert’s followers.

“ Thank you, Mr. Harrison. That will save me a bit of money, as you would remark. Blake, how much did I say these men were to get ? ”

“ A pound a day, my lord.”

“ Then just mark it down to eight shillings, Blake, and I hope Mr. Harrison’s mob will not expostulate with him because of the reduction. Gentlemen, we have been merely trying an experiment, which comes to its conclusion with this meeting. It has cost me several thousands of pounds, but I don’t in the least grudge the outlay. I think I understand better than when I began your objections to the plan. You hate work, and so, I must confess, do I.”

He looked somewhat ruefully at his calloused hands, then smiled at his silent audience.

“ My friend Mr. Stillson Crane thought he could make real men of you. I didn’t know whether that was possible or not, being a very ignorant person, in the position of the girl about whom Sir W. S. Gilbert wrote. She didn’t know whether she could waltz or not, but would rather like to try. I imagine

she failed at the waltzing as I have done at the re-generation business. In speaking of Mr. Crane I, as one of his labourers, must pay a deserved tribute to his goodness of heart, to his uprightness, to his fine tact and kindness towards us, and I shall compensate him for his earnest labour on our behalf, and his disappointment at the failure which has followed it.

“ Pardon me if I consider you a lot of mugs, which was a phrase I heard used by one of you regarding the authorities here. I confess I thought I’d find one, at least, among the forty who would, as time went on, make some remark more worth listening to than the braying of a donkey, but I admit that you don’t interest me, and I care not a copper—don’t start, I’m making no reference to the police—whether you’re regenerated or not. As it is impossible for me to describe adequately my contempt for you, I shall give up trying. It is probable that if you’d been taken young, say between the ages of six and ten, something might have been made of you, and I believe any hopeful Government that addresses itself to this question will abandon the bettering of adult incompetents, and turn its energies towards setting the youth of our land in the right path.

“Now, Blake,” said Stranleigh, turning to the secretary, “did you put the pound a day in envelopes, as I ordered?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Then it would be rather a pity to tear them all open again, and since I’ve had the pleasure of telling these gentlemen what I think of them, I propose that we leave their compensation at the figure I first intended. You’d better go now.”

Blake, rising, took with him a stout, well-filled handbag, and disappeared. A moment later the purr of a departing automobile was heard.

“Now, gentlemen, a very few words more, and I bespeak your serious attention. Within an hour you will be in possession of more money than any of you ever received at one time. It is perhaps foolish to make this donation, which every man before me knows he does not deserve, but if it enables you to get jobs, I shall be very glad. It will doubtless lead some of you a little faster on the road to destruction. That I cannot prevent, but I give you a final warning. The road from here to the station is direct. A fast walker may do the trick in thirty-seven minutes. Blake will wait at the station for quarter of an hour only, and there will hand to each man a packet, containing five-

pound notes and some gold; so if you want the money, you have no time to lose."

"We can't get there in quarter of an hour," cried Harrison.

"Thank you, Bert, for calling my attention to the turgidness of my language. Blake has reached the station by this time. He knows the moment at which you will start from this building, and will allow thirty-seven minutes to elapse, then wait quarter of an hour longer. We are connected by telephone with the station, so if you do any damage before leaving, as you threatened Mr. Crane, you will pay very dearly for it, and you won't have time to make any depredations on the road." Stranleigh pulled out his watch. "The foot-race will begin two minutes from now."

Every man sprang to his feet, and there seemed the likelihood of a stampede, but Stranleigh held up his hand.

"It is useless attempting to leave prematurely. The doors are locked, and you cannot break them down in two minutes, but even if you did I'd telephone to Blake, and he and the money would vanish. The doors are to be opened at the exact moment by my friend the gardener, and I am sure he will watch your retreat with more joy than if he

were witnessing the most exciting Marathon race the world ever saw."

The gardener, at a nod from Stranleigh, rose and went to the door.

"Patience, gentlemen," Stranleigh added to the uneasy crowd. "Just one minute more."

"I say, mates," shouted Harrison, "three cheers for his ludship!"

The cheers were given with a will, deafening in their volume in that restricted hall. As they ceased, the rattling of chains betokened the opening of a door, and the crowd surged forward.

"Wait a bit, lads. Three more cheers for 'Long-beard' and the gardener!"

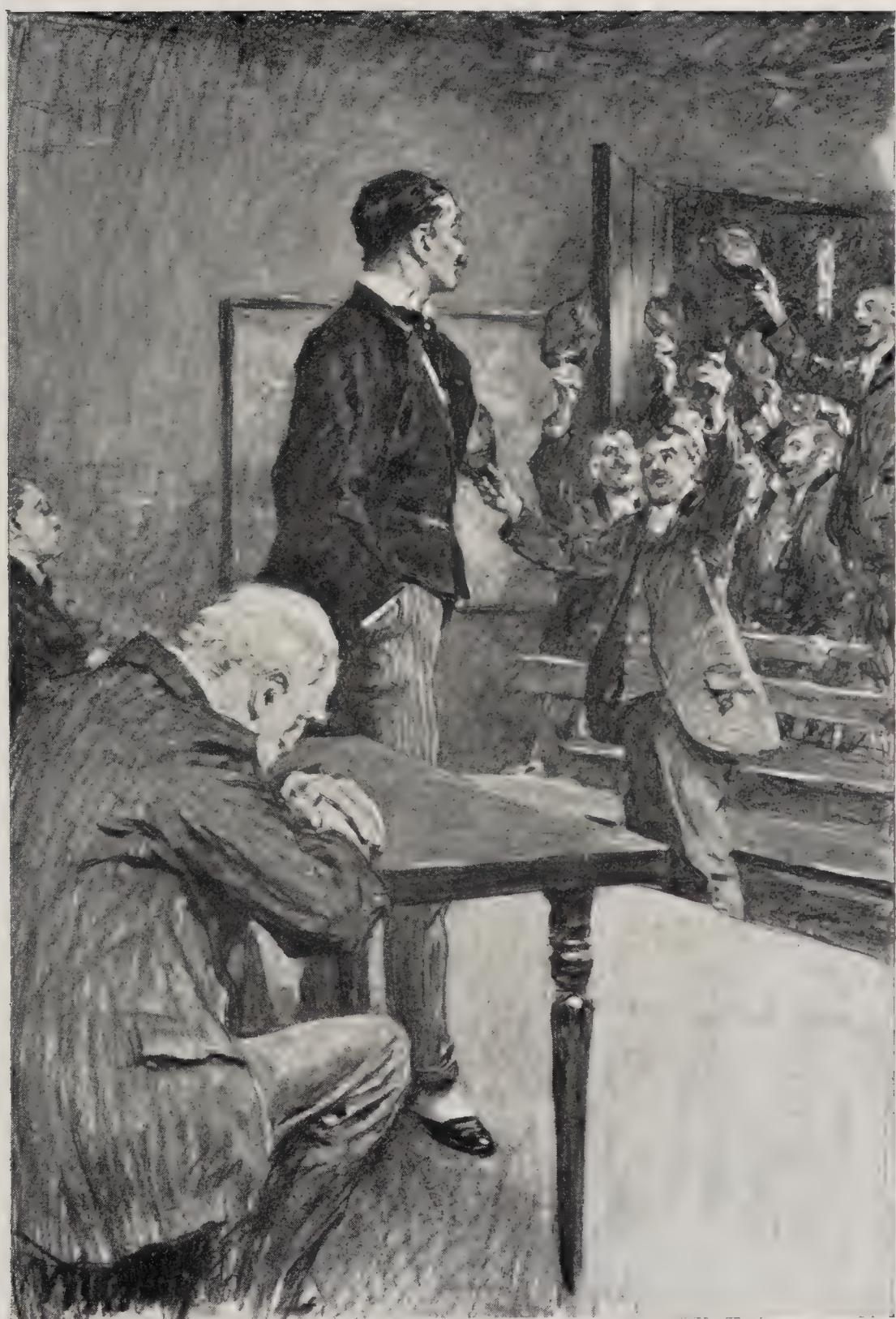
These were given as Stillson Crane's head sunk in his hands.

"And now, you scum of the earth," roared Harrison, "file out like soldiers, and get in line! No man move till I give the word."

The men obeyed him. Stranleigh and Crane followed them to the door.

"One, two, three—go!" cried Harrison, and away they went in a body, never noticing there were no police about the building.

"By George!" said Stranleigh. "I am still in doubt about those men."



“The cheers were given with a will.”

“It needs one of themselves,” said Crane, “like that man Harrison. *He* should have been superintendent.”

“No one could have done his duty better than you, Mr. Crane,” said Stranleigh, placing his hand affectionately on the shoulder of his former manager.

CHAPTER VI.

LORD STRANLEIGH ON GUARD

“I’m going to take the rest-cure,” announced Stranleigh. “This ‘back to the land’ theory is all very well so long as you don’t practise it.”

“Do you regret, then, your experiment with the phalanstery?” said Blake. “It did cost a lot of money.”

“Oh, money!” cried Stranleigh, with a grimace. “I’ve just had a report this morning from my man of business in London that has quite discouraged me.”

The secretary looked up, an expression of disquiet on his face. The financial affairs of his lordship were completely out of Mr. Blake’s range, but he knew that Stranleigh had been spending the coin in a most lavish manner, and this sort of thing could not be continued indefinitely without disaster. Blake’s position was a most lucrative one, and he

did not wish to see it jeopardised. A few years more in Stranleigh's employ, and his invested accumulations would make him independent so far as income was concerned ; therefore he fervently hoped his young master would moderate his excessive expenditure.

“A gloomy report ?” he asked anxiously.

“Well, that depends on the point of view. For some time now I have been trying, as you know, to ameliorate in a measure a few of the evils by which we are surrounded. I rather posed, before myself of course, not in public, as being a self-sacrificing man. Now it appears from this report received to-day that, despite all my efforts, my income has increased by a quarter of a million.”

“Oh,” replied Blake, his brow clearing, “that's the state of things, is it ? I daresay most people would wish they had no greater cause of worry. Then, so far as self-sacrifice is concerned, you did stick to the digging of the earth for nearly two months in the spring, when I'm sure you didn't like it.”

“Of course I didn't. I became impressed with the futility of labour, and instead of experiencing that sense of exaltation which writers tell us follows honest toil, I merely knew myself to be a fool. All

that I could produce from an acre of ground in a year would amount to very little, therefore my industry was folly. There was not even left to me the joy of slumber, for although I am considered something of an athlete, practical horticulture made my bones ache so much that I could not sleep at night. What's that poem about sheep and the rich man, and sleep and the poor man ? ”

“ I'm sure I don't know,” replied Blake.

“ Why don't you know ? You're my private secretary, and it's the business of a private secretary to know ever so much more than his employer. A private secretary should let his gifts so shine before men through his chief, that the public over-estimate the qualities of that chief. I know at least a score of incompetents, especially in Parliament, ignorant asses, who are winning the plaudits of the populace, simply because each has a brilliant private secretary, yet here I want an insignificant little untruthful verse, and you can't give it to me.”

“ How does it go ? I'll look it up in the book of quotations.”

“ Oh, blow your book of quotations ! If I remembered how it went, I shouldn't need any assistance. It's something like this :—

“ ‘ Whence cometh sheep
To the rich man’s door,
Whence cometh sleep
To the bed that’s poor.’

My bed was poor enough during our gardening spasm, but very little sleep came to it.”

“ I never heard the verse,” said Blake, “ and I don’t see much coherency in it. I know the doors of some rich men, but the sheep don’t gather there —at least, not in London. The police keep these ferocious animals away.”

“ Quite so, Blake, quite so. The point is, however, that I am becoming seriously alarmed about my mental condition. I called myself a fool a few minutes ago, and I’m prepared to prove that statement.”

“ No necessity,” replied Blake glibly.

Stranleigh laughed.

“ You’re willing to take my word for it ? ”

“ Perfectly.”

“ But I can furnish evidence that most other people are fools, too.”

“ Carlyle said that years ago.”

“ Look here, Blake, although I complain of your lack of knowledge, you mustn’t infer that I want too much information. Some of your remarks are

singularly inopportune, and you should remember that when a man complains of his own mental equipment, he always does so to a person undoubtedly his intellectual inferior."

"I thought you said a while ago that most men owe their brilliancy to private secretaries?"

"Every rule has its exceptions, Blake. Let us prove exceptional. The point I am endeavouring to make is this: I have tried to carry out some of my own ideas, and one or two of other people's. Failure in both cases. When I advertised for an idea, and was willing to pay for it, the response was overwhelming. Have you had time to examine any more of the letters?"

"I have looked through them all."

"Industrious man. How many good ideas did you get?"

"Two. Three at most."

"A modern rendition of the needle in the haystack. What was the idea that most commended itself to you?"

"That your lordship should go to prison for the good of the country."

"Well, Blake, aware as you must be that I do everything by deputy, I can't see why you're so cheerful about the proposal. However, though I

admit a taste of jail would probably do my private secretary good, I nevertheless fail to see what benefit could accrue to the country, which would thus be compelled to support him."

"The writer, who hails from Plymouth, points out with some show of reason that no scheme of philanthropy is of any avail while England lies open to conquest by the foreigner. The question which, according to him, dwarfs all other problems, is national defence. He refers to the ease with which England can be invaded, and cites William the Norman, the Duke of Monmouth, and William, Prince of Orange."

"Yes; but the Duke of Monmouth got his head taken off for landing at Lyme Regis."

"Certainly; yet the other two captured the country, and so far as invasion is concerned, the Duke was successful. He failed through having no competent general, when once he got inland. The unmilitary Duke lost his head first at the Battle of Sedgemoor, and secondly, on Tower Hill. Your correspondent suggests that you charter a foreign ship and land either at Salcombe or Lyme Regis, then march your men inland until you are surrounded and captured. The foreigners would likely be dismissed, while you would be sent to penal servitude. This

would arouse the country in two directions ; first, regarding the ease with which you landed your men, and secondly, through sympathy with you, whose intention had been to awake the people to their danger. There would be agitation for your release, and the whole question of coastal defence would be ventilated thoroughly.”

“ Excellent, excellent ! I will finance the expedition, and you, Blake, shall lead it. The glory of martyrdom shall be yours.”

“ I’m so capable a private secretary that I could not think of depriving your lordship of my services.”

“ True, Blake, true. Besides, we are both going in for the rest-cure.”

“ Nothing better for that than one of his Majesty’s prisons, my lord.”

“ I never contradict a man of experience, Blake. Send the writer of this letter fifty pounds for it ; tell him it will be thought over, and if adopted, an additional four hundred and fifty forwarded. We are now heading for the simple life, and freedom from brain work. How long will it take you to pack up ? ”

“ Oh, half an hour.”

“ All right ! Tell the chauffeur to have the car round in that time, with petrol enough to run us

a couple of hundred miles, although to-day we shall go but fifty or thereabouts."

The spot where this conversation took place was Stranleigh's estate in Dorsetshire. The party of three ran to Exeter, where they enjoyed their midday meal, then along the excellent south-west high road to Ashburton, and south-east to lovely Totnes, next south-west again to Kingsbridge, celebrated for white beer and the peppery Peter Pindar. From this point Salcombe Estuary was skirted, until the road turned directly eastward. At Chillington the car deflected straight south over a somewhat inferior road to Chivelstone, next east through South Allington, and finally southward, past a water-mill, through a deep valley, and along a lane by the stream, so rough that the automobile made very slow and difficult progress. The hills on either side were densely wooded. It seemed as if the motorists had come to the end of all things, and indeed, they were at the end of England, approaching its most southerly point excepting only the Lizard and Land's End.

At last the valley widened, and there broke gloriously upon the tourists a view of the blue sea, with a wild, rocky headland jutting into it to the east. Here Blake sprang out to open an

obstructing gate, and the chauffeur drove his machine through, the wheels sinking deep into the sand. Stranleigh stepped out of the car to stretch his limbs. Blake, closing the gate, came alongside, looking doubtfully at the automobile.

“I hope,” said Blake, “you can get it out of here.”

“Can you turn round, Henri ?” asked Stranleigh.

“Of a surety, my lord,” replied the confident Frenchman.

“Then I think you’d better drive back through the gateway again, where you will be on firm ground at least.”

While Henri accomplished this, Stranleigh and Blake walked across the cove towards a mill-house that stood beside the stream, and from this building several children peered out at the wonderful machine, the like of which they had probably never seen before. Opposite the cottage, by the very edge of the sea, stood the ruins of a stone structure, roofless, its walls concealed by a luxurious growth of vegetation.

“That,” said Stranleigh, “is the remains of Lannacombe Mill, and, curiously enough, it is in a way an object-lesson on the theme of our correspondent who would put me in prison. During our last war with France a privateer sent a boatload of men into this cove. They took from the miller every-

thing they could lay their hands on, even to the bed on which his wife and her new-born child lay. I often wonder if that little Englishman, when he grew up, wished for another war so that he might revenge the cowardly attack on his parents. The robbery took place as night was falling, and it happened that at the moment the miller held in a bag his year's earnings, represented by good British gold. He ran upstairs and flung the bag out into the dusk, hoping it would thus escape the searchers, who, however, were not easily baffled. They took the miller's lantern and searched outside for anything that could be found, and next morning the privateer was gone.

“ The miller was up at daybreak, and became more and more despondent as he failed to find the bag. When called in to breakfast he raised his hands and his eyes toward heaven, deplored his ruin, and then, in the notch of a large tree adjacent to the mill-house, he saw the leathern bag, which had never fallen to the ground at all, and had been tied so well that not a coin escaped.”

The two slowly climbed the very steep hill.

“ Where have we got to ? ” gasped Blake, rather out of breath.

“ I told you. Lannacombe Mill,”

“ Yes ; but what part of the Devonshire coast ? ”

“ Just round the corner to the east is the Start, and when we get up a little higher, I’ll show you Prawle Point to the west.”

When they reached the top, both paused before the striking scene presented to them of the iron coast, where acres of black jagged rocks extended from the steep cliffs far out into the sea, like the lower jaw of a gigantic alligator. Stranleigh said the scene was sublime ; Blake called it horrible.

A naval-looking man strolled up with a telescope under his arm, and overhearing the last remark, chimed in :

“ You may well say that, sir, but you should see it in a south-west gale, with the waves rolling in torn to pieces on them rocks.”

“ A ship wouldn’t have much chance,” said Blake, “ once she touched the reef.”

“ No chance at all, sir. It’s a terrible coast. On a March night, in ’91, the London steamer *Marana*, went ashore, and twenty-five hands lost, and an hour later the barque *Dryad*, of Liverpool, all hands lost, twenty-one of them, and next morning not a plank or a spar of either vessel to be found. Fifty-two lives lost that night ; men and boats ground to bits on them rocks.”

“Cheerful place,” muttered Blake, and Stranleigh, turning to the man, changed the subject.

“Where’s Morgan?”

“Morgan, sir?”

“Yes; head of this coastguard station.”

The young man waved his hand towards a row of two-storeyed houses that seemed brand new, and ridiculously out of place, as if they had been taken from a street on the outskirts of London. These incongruous-looking suburban villas were situated in the midst of a most trimly-kept piece of level ground, part lawn and part garden. In front of them rose the white-painted flagpole, with its cross-spar set at an angle of forty-five, thin rope slightly flapping, but no flag flying.

“Oh, sir, this be’ant a coastguard; leastways, it’s abandoned.”

“Abandoned? What do you mean?”

“Why, sir, I means just what I say. This was a coastguard station once, but the men are all ordered away, and won’t be here no more. I’m only the caretaker until the place is sold.”

“Oh, it’s to be sold, is it?” cried Stranleigh in amazement. “Why, these houses seem new.”

“They are, sir. Not a year old, I daresay, but

you can buy them now for a good deal less than they cost ; ground and all, sir, free'old."

"Really ! That is very interesting, but I did not come as a purchaser. In the past I have spent many restful days on this eagle's nest, Morgan kindly providing me with board and lodging. He was not certain he had the legal right to take boarders, but I persuaded him to risk it. Can I do the same with you ? "

The caretaker shook his head, and with visible reluctance declined the offer.

"That's impossible, sir. All the houses are empty except one, and in that there is only a shake-down for myself, and an oil stove where I cook what vittles I need. It's a mighty lonesome place here, and I shall be glad to get back to town again."

Stranleigh glanced at the sun, low down in the west.

"In that case, Blake, we'll have to be off as quick as possible. I hope the motor won't break down before we get out of the wilderness. I'm very much obliged for your information, caretaker, and if this bit of gold will mitigate the loneliness, you are more than welcome to it."

The guardian was profuse in his thanks for the unexpected size of the tip, because even small

donations were scarce in that locality. The two descended the hill past the ruins, over the stream and through the gate, where Henri patiently awaited them.

“ Make for Kingsbridge,” said his master, “ over the same roads by which you came. Drive carefully out of this valley, and when you reach the highway, forget that there’s a speed limit. I want to be in Kingsbridge before dark.”

They negotiated the rough lane beside the stream with success, and completed the run to Kingsbridge in the fastest time on record, but without molestation. The elasticity of the law is wonderful when you get more than two hundred miles west of London. Very soon after their arrival in Kingsbridge, Stranleigh and Blake sat down to an excellent dinner at the “ King’s Arms,” an ancient hostelry that had begun existence as a Church House, entered an era of prosperity as a coaching inn, and now was modernised to meet the motor traffic. Stranleigh had been silent since leaving the lonely coastguard station. Ordering a tankard of white beer as an experiment, he said to Blake :

“ This meal doubtless excels the *cuisine* of our friend the caretaker.”

“ Did you really intend to stop on that horrible headland ? ”

“Certainly, if Morgan had been there.”

“Why, a person would go melancholy mad in a week !”

“Oh, there’s more going on than you think ! You see, it is nearly the southernmost point of England, and the shipping of the world passes it. Every now and then you may witness a flotilla of torpedo-boat destroyers, one black boat following another round the Start, making for Plymouth. Then there are real battleships and cruisers, and nearly every day huge passenger boats, American liners, all the German leviathans, and the monsters of the White Star Line. Brilliantly lighted up at night, these marine giants always remind me of Kipling’s simile : ‘Like a grand hotel.’ Even on a calm day the sea is perpetually quarrelling with the pointed rocks, the most admirable object-lesson of persistence I know, and in a storm, when it comes to blows, it is the most majestic sight I have ever seen.”

Blake made a grimace, and shuddered.

“That little spit of sand down by the mill is the finest possible early morning bathing-place,” continued Stranleigh, “with the exciting advantage of strong currents. I am never sure, when I plunge in there, but that I may be compelled to land at

Dartmouth or Torquay. I wish I could take a header there to-morrow morning."

" You have abandoned the idea of the coastguard station, then ? "

" Abandoned it ? Not likely, with the example of that incessant marine battle before me. No ; to-morrow will be your busy day. I have already discovered that there is a train for London at eight o'clock in the morning, with a restaurant-car. It will land you at Paddington at one-thirty, just after you have consumed an excellent Great Western lunch. You will take a taxi to the office of Berkim and Duncannon, Old Jewry. Ask them to get in touch with the Government, and buy for me the freehold of Lannacombe coastguard station, getting the deal through as quickly as possible.

" Then take train to Southampton, and call on the captain of my yacht, which you will order him to transform into a cargo steamer. Find the best house-fitting emporium in the town, and purchase an equipment complete for five bedrooms, two drawing-rooms, and a kitchen. Put all this on the yacht, telling the captain to land the goods at Lannacombe Bay, if the weather is fine ; if not, to push on to Salcombe Harbour and await further orders. You may then return to London."

“One moment, Lord Stranleigh. Before going further, allow me to become accustomed to the amateurish idiocy of your proposal.”

“Which part of it? The coastguard station, or the furnishing thereof?”

“The furniture proposition. Of course, the buying of the coastguard station merely means that you will spend good money to acquire property that you can’t give away. The English may be mostly fools, as you remarked this morning, but they are not so imbecile as to buy several suburban villas on an inaccessible rock.”

“I don’t intend to sell again,” said Stranleigh, with great good nature, “but I am evolving a plan to dispose of this desirable marine property to the Government that now heedlessly parts with it. Your main objection I take to be the acquiring of furniture, yet much as I love the simple life, I can’t reside in empty houses.”

“Certainly not; but you purpose making a freighter of your beautiful yacht, and will knock more paint and varnish off the craft and break more of her fittings, than the whole thing is worth. Even imagine that done, there may not be another day this year when you can land the stuff at Lannacombe Cove.”

"All right, Blake. What do you propose?"

"I propose a little spasm of sanity for a change. I suggest that you telegraph your instructions to the solicitors, thus saving the whole forenoon tomorrow, besides encouraging the telegraph people. Then select what furniture you need right here in Kingsbridge. The seller will gladly cart it over to Lannacombe, and his men would carry it up the hill, placing it in the particular houses you choose. You thus assist local trade, always a popular thing to do, and the shopkeeper will be most anxious to please you. Doubtless your yacht will be saved from shipwreck, and I shall escape an unnecessary journey to London."

"Why, I thought you were tired of this place? Nothing doing, according to you."

"I'm not tired of Kingsbridge and Salcombe. The tired feeling comes upon me among those rocks. Still, if you furnish a villa or two, and engage a cook who will equal the range I buy, I'm content to spend the whole summer at Lannacombe."

"Right you are, Blake. I think of Minerva whenever you begin to discourse."

"I've another suggestion to make. Telegraph to the captain of your yacht commanding him to bring her round to Salcombe Harbour, and not to

leave behind your most delectable *chef*. He may steam right up to Kingsbridge if you don't mind your yacht being left high and dry when the tide goes out. We might live on the yacht until a telegram comes from your solicitors saying that the deal with the Government is completed. Then the furniture can go at once to Lannacombe."

"Very well, make it so, as the captain says," agreed Stranleigh, rising and yawning. "I've had so much fresh air to-day on the motor, and so much salt air at Lannacombe, that I'm sleepy. I will show you an example of early rising to-morrow morning by deputy. You are appointed. I shall expect the telegrams sent and the furniture chosen before I breakfast, and, by the way, make arrangements for the telephone to be left at the coastguard station. Good-night."

Kingsbridge seems to be so called because no king ever entered it, and there is no river and no bridge within its boundaries. Next day Stranleigh strolled round the quaint old place, keeping a wary eye out for Blake, whom he avoided with much ingenuity, for he knew that his secretary wished to consult him further about the furniture, and Stranleigh didn't want to be bothered. In one of these sudden side-trackings to circumvent the

energetic Blake, Stranleigh entered the yard of the fine old church, and was arrested by an epitaph, which he wrote down in his note-book, wondering whether the poet of the town, Peter Pindar, composed it :

“ Here lie I at the chancel door ;
Here lie I because I’m poor ;
The farther in, the more you’ll pay ;
Here lie I as warm as they.”

“ This chap seems to have been contented with his lot. I wonder what, besides getting into the church, he would have done with his money if he had it. We millionaires are a sorry, unimaginative crew. Now, if Gilbert Chesterton, or H. G. Wells, or George Bernard Shaw had several millions each, they would certainly do something original. The American millionaire gives money to found a university, of which there are too many already. The English millionaire leaves his cash to hospitals. Now and then a rich man tries to get out of the rut, but without conspicuous success. Carnegie, the man of iron, representing strength, gives New York a library ; Tate, the sugar-maker, representing sweetness, gives London a picture gallery. Out of the strong came forth sweetness, said Samson.

I was going to apply that text somehow to the ingots of steel and cubes of sugar, but my brain is quite evidently becoming numb. Civilisation is undoing me. I hope it will harden when it confronts realities among the rocks of Lannacombe."

Several days later a telegram came from the London solicitors, announcing to Stranleigh that he now possessed the coveted coastguard station. Once they were installed at Lannacombe, Stranleigh said to Blake :

" Do you know why I brought you here ? "

" Yes," replied Blake, gloomily, " to undergo the rest-cure."

" Well, not exactly. I desired you, rather, to witness the effects of the rest-cure upon me. Bitterly will you regret your scoffing at the indolence I proposed for both of us. Now your busy days begin. Is the typewriter in good working order ? "

" Excellent."

" You brought with you all the supplies necessary for that diabolical machine ? "

" Everything."

" Very good. Now, I wish a history written of all my doings from the time I landed upon this rock until the day I leave."

" I can do that with a lead pencil, and in five

minutes each day ; that is, if I have to record your bodily exertions and your brilliant remarks. Nothing *can* happen at this fag-end of creation."

Stranleigh went on calmly, unheeding all innuendo :

" Every letter I dictate must be done in duplicate, so that I may possess exact impressions of all my correspondence. This eyrie is going to be the busiest spot in the Empire, and for the next two or three months much more important than London."

" Important to whom, my lord ? "

" Never mind ; yours not to make reply, yours not to reason why, yours but to do your noble six hundred words every fifteen minutes on that machine. Now, Blake, your first letter will be a telegram, and your first telegram a 'phone call. Get into communication with whatever telegraph office or telephone wire connects, and send the solicitors a message to this effect. Thank them for their promptness in buying Lannacombe. Inform them how to communicate with me by telegraph or telephone. Ask them to discover how many coastguard stations are for sale. Instruct them to purchase for me all that are in the market. If any have been sold already to private persons the solicitors must get in touch with those private owners, and either buy or rent for the summer the said coastguard stations."

“Great heavens!” ejaculated Blake, “that’s what I call a large order. Shall I ask them to make a bid for the rest of the island?”

“Now, what I want from you, Blake, is prompt action, and not attempted sarcasm. Send that message over the wire, and return for further instructions.”

When Blake came back, Stranleigh said :

“Now take this down in shorthand as accurately as possible, type it out, then read it to me. I’ll merely suggest what I want, and leave the details entirely to your carrying-out. It is rather a particular piece of work, and I am anxious there should be no publicity and no bungling. I wish to engage for the summer two hundred men at a price just a little more than the current wage of such men in their respective localities. All their expenses shall be paid, and they shall enjoy free board and lodging while in my service.

“These men must possess naval or military training; none is to be over fifty years of age; all must speak English intelligently, and if acquainted with England and its manners and customs, so much the better. Fifty of these men are to be selected in Hamburg, subjects of the German Emperor; fifty are to come from Amsterdam,

citizens of Holland ; fifty from Antwerp, true Belgians ; fifty from Dunkirk, Cherbourg, or any of the ports between these two, citizens of France. The pay of these men shall begin immediately, and they are to hold themselves at my disposal in or near the ports from which they are selected, so that when I call for them at any time with my yacht, they will be ready to embark within an hour of receiving notice.

“ Meanwhile, purchase and have delivered here military tents, sufficient for the shelter of two hundred men, in accordance with military rule. Having no idea myself how many men a commander puts in a tent, you will acquire this information. The tents are to be packed in one of the empty houses. Secure also cooking equipment for such a military camp. During the intervals learn from headquarters what are the duties of a coastguard man.”

As Stranleigh became silent, Blake looked up, a quizzical smile on his face.

“ Is that all ? ” he asked.

“ All for the present, Mr. Blake. There is, of course, much more to follow.”

“ Yes ; I see dimly ahead many things that may follow.”

“ I daresay you do. Have you any comments to offer ? ”

“ Merely a suggestion, Lord Stranleigh. You choose an inconvenient spot upon the coast. It would have been better to select the coastguard station on Portland Bill, if there is one at that point.”

“ Why ? ”

“ Because it is so much more handy for Portland Prison, where aristocratic contraveners of the law are placed in retirement.”

Stranleigh laughed.

“ Oh, you see breakers ahead, do you ? ”

“ Yes ; law breakers.”

Again Stranleigh laughed.

“ Coming from you, Blake, that isn’t so bad. Still, there is nothing illegal in the task assigned to you. If it comes to the worst you can always prove stupidity on your part, and claim that you didn’t fathom the nefariousness of my designs. Should any contravention of the statutes ensue, I’ll take full command and full responsibility.”

Within a few weeks Stranleigh found himself the owner of nearly a hundred coastguard stations. Leaving Blake in charge of Lannacombe, the young nobleman departed aboard his yacht. Some ten days previously the tents had been erected, partly to learn whether they would stand the heavy winds frequenting that section of the coast, even in summer,

and partly to discover whether any enquiry would be made regarding them, but so far the white village attracted no attention. Stranleigh picked up his men at Hamburg, Amsterdam, Antwerp and Cherbourg, and steamed leisurely across the Channel, favoured in his design by a peaceful summer calm.

Guided by the Start light, the yacht cast anchor off Lannacombe Cove, a manœuvre which the captain had tried several times from his base in Salcombe Harbour. The men landed without mishap or molestation, and were conducted to their tents, while the yacht stood out to sea, and entered the Salcombe Estuary in daylight.

The invaders, amply provided with money, were sent to their various coastguard stations in batches of about half a dozen, marching to different railway stations, thus to attract as little attention as possible. Week by week their reports came in, written in French, German or Dutch. On an average there were three men of the same nationality at each station, and they had all been warned that continuous pay and avoidance of trouble lay in keeping their mouths shut. Being naval and military men, well disciplined, this injunction was strictly obeyed.

At the end of a couple of months, Stranleigh gave them all leave of absence on full pay, they to

make their way home by Southampton and Harwich, each to report in his own handwriting when he arrived. Once they were safely out of the way, the following letter to the British Government was dictated by Stranleigh, who said to Blake, with a smile, before he began :—

“ You have never appreciated my craftiness in selecting Germans, Dutchmen, Belgians and Frenchmen for this enterprise. If the Government intends to make a fuss it may find itself involved in an international complication. Now, take this down carefully :—

“ Earl Stranleigh of Wychwood begs to inform His Majesty’s Government that early in the summer he purchased from it such abandoned coastguard stations as the Government wished to dispose of. For two months these stations have been occupied by Germans, Dutchmen, Belgians, and Frenchmen, whose reports, in their various languages, Earl Stranleigh encloses for the information of the authorities. The men sailed from various Continental ports in Earl Stranleigh’s yacht, and were landed without hindrance upon the coast of England. They were all naval and military men, and two hundred of them lived for a week under military discipline in a camp of tents, on British soil. They

travelled through England to their various stations, and have now returned to their respective homes by the ordinary routes. So far as Lord Stranleigh is aware, no enquiry has been made, and no questions asked.

“(Signed) STRANLEIGH OF WYCHWOOD.”

Two weeks passed without any answer to this letter, then arrived a long blue envelope, decorated by the capital letters “O.H.M.S.” Stranleigh tore it open, and read:—

“Earl Stranleigh of Wychwood:—

“My Lord,

“The Right Honourable the Secretary of State for the Blue desires me to thank your lordship for the communication sent to him.

“Yours, JOHN HOBSON, *Secretary.*”

“Pigeon-holed, by jingo!” ejaculated Stranleigh, throwing down the paper for Blake’s inspection.

Blake read, and laughed.

“Good old British Government! The villain is foiled again.”

“But the villain still pursues her!” cried his lordship. “I shall now qualify for prison with an effectiveness that cannot be ignored.”

CHAPTER VII.

THE NAPPING OF THE KID.

No man in England was held in such diverging estimation by the public as the Right Honourable Dennis Macgregor Wynn, Secretary of State for the Blue. He was of Irish, English, Welsh, and Scottish blood, and the result of this mixture somewhat bewildered the man in the street, who is a plain, straightforward chap, rather impatient with subtlety. The Right Honourable Mr. Wynn possessed the virtues of those four differing nationalities, and the people who recognised this regarded him as a demi-god. He was also endowed with the defects of this nationalistic quartette, and those who appreciated that side of him called him a demagogue. Of one thing everyone was convinced, namely, that he was a very astute politician ; an Englishman in England, a Scotchman in Scotland, a Welshman in Wales, and an Irishman in Ireland,

as you will learn by perusing his speeches in those divisions of the British Isles.

He was supposed to rule the Cabinet much more effectively than the Premier, or, indeed, any other member of it, half the nation earnestly believing he was luring it down to destruction ; the other half that he was heading straight for Elysium. It was generally agreed that he never spared himself, but worked like a demon, and, if he believed everything he said in his eloquent and popular addresses, his opinions must have been as varied and tumultuous as his blood.

The more militant section of his audiences listening to his eloquence on the brotherhood of man, were filled with distrust, believing him to be indifferent regarding the defence of his country. Everyone was prepared to welcome brotherhood, but many of them thought that the Big Stick should be within reach, in case brotherhood happened to slip a cog.

One hot afternoon in late July the Right Honourable Mr. Wynn was hard at work in his official Downing Street room, entirely alone. There were some knotty points of Government to settle, and for once the Minister desired peace and quietness. He had dismissed all his underlings and had abandoned successively coat, waistcoat, necktie and

collar. Thus he sat at his work, absorbed in thought and calculation.

There came a gentle knock at the door, and with a frown of impatience the Minister called :—
“ Come in ! ”

The outside guard entered, a card in his hand.

“ Oh, I say, Sims,” cried the Minister, “ it’s impossible for me to see anyone just now ! ”

“ Very good, sir,” replied the man, turning away, but on reflection Wynn said sharply—

“ Who is it ? ”

“ Lord Stranleigh of Wychwood, sir.”

“ Oh ! Wait a moment.”

The piercing eyes of the Minister seemed to look through the attendant, and gradually a gentle smile curved the corners of his mouth.

“ Lord Stranleigh ! ” he muttered, and then :—
“ Oh, well, Sims, bring him in ! ”

There entered the most admirably groomed young man the Right Honourable had ever seen, and the Minister’s first wonder was how he could look so cool, coming from the outer furnace of London in hot July. The silk hat he held in his hand was as glossy as the coat of a thoroughbred. Not a hair of his smoothly-brushed head was out of place. No crease was visible in his clothes, and

actually the very white linen collar seemed as stiff as if made of steel. The Right Honourable could not help glancing at his own neckwear, lying abandoned, limp, and visibly soiled, on a chair.

The Minister rose, shirt open at the neck, his abundant hair wildly touzled, moustache unkempt, and laughed. Lord Stranleigh smiled in sympathy.

“It is very good of you to receive me on such a hot day. It’s beastly warm outside.”

“I can testify to that, but I must say you don’t look it.”

The Minister shook hands cordially with his visitor.

“I think I’ve never had the pleasure of meeting you before, Lord Stranleigh.”

“No, that pleasure was denied you by your own followers. I called upon you in a rather rough town up north. You were to address the virtuous working man that night. It was during the heat of last election, much higher in temperature than to-day, even.”

“Ah, yes. I remember. I was very sorry indeed to hear you had been ill-treated.”

“‘Ill-treated’ is putting it mildly. I was slugged. However, that did not matter so much as the fact that I was not allowed to have speech with you.

I carried in a little brown bag one million pounds in Bank of England notes."

The Minister's face grew serious.

"What became of them?" he asked.

"They are back in their birthplace. It seems that even when insensible I clung to the bag with the tenacity of my caste, or perhaps you would say like Judas, who also carried a bag, though not so well-filled, I fancy."

At first the right honourable gentleman smiled, then his face became grave, and indeed, menacing.

"For whom was that money intended, my lord?" he asked.

"I hoped to place it in your hands," replied Stranleigh.

The other did not speak for a few minutes, then he said slowly:—

"You mentioned your caste a moment ago. It is true that I hold it in scant respect, but I never went so far as supposing it foolish enough to believe I could be bribed into abandoning the course I have marked out for myself."

Lord Stranleigh blushed a delicate pink, and his embarrassment interfered with his utterance. He almost stuttered.

"You m-mustn't think that because I am a

good deal of a fool other men of rank in England resemble me. Within my caste, as we seem agreed to call it, there are many whom I respect and admire ; yes, and envy for their gifts in statesmanship. I do not sympathise with their opinions. I disbelieve in a hereditary house, and wish to see legislation by the Lords abolished. The money I hoped to donate was not intended for you personally, but to promote, in legitimate manner, of course, the reform we both have at heart."

The Right Honourable's alert mind gleamed from his eyes as he gazed across the table in amazement at his visitor. Could it be possible that his party, clutching everywhere for money to carry on a desperate warfare, had actually sandbagged the man who would have endowed it with a fortune so tremendous ; a fortune which would have changed the feebly encroaching tide into an overwhelming flood ?

" Do you mean to say," he cried, " that you are actually a Radical ? "

Again Lord Stranleigh stammered.

" I-I-I don't exactly know how to label myself. I have always been rather mixed so far as opinions are concerned. For instance, although my views and yours coincide regarding the House of Lords,

I find myself at variance with you touching the defences of our country. I should call myself, perhaps, a Torified Socialist."

"Oh, the defences of our country are all right!"

"I have practically proven that they are not."

"You refer to the coastguard question, and what you have proved is merely that you do not understand it. With the rise of wireless telegraphy, and the tremendous increase of speed both on sea and land, coastguards are now as picturesque and antiquated as bows and arrows. No one appreciates more than I do the stalwart, manly, efficient coastguardsman, and there is enough of the Celt in me to be touched by the thought that while we sleep, this splendid body of men marches to and fro along the ramparts of England, never out of sound of the sea. To north, south, east and west of us, these vigilant sentries are on guard, watching the darkened waters, but it is all simply an æsthetic fancy. The stolid policeman on his beat is a useful functionary. The coastguardman on his is obsolete."

"I am not so sure of that, sir. I visited the wireless telegraphic station on Brow Head a short time since, and what was shown me there impressed me very much. Particularly was I struck with its Chamber of Death, the key to whose door is never

out of the possession of the man in charge. If the lever across the doorway is not properly adjusted, and a man enters, his life flashes from him like the flame from a blown candle. Yet as I stood on that wild headland, I realised that so great has been the advance in modern gunnery that a warship, quite out of sight over the horizon, could smite the station into ruins with a single shell."

The Minister looked at him with a quizzical smile, his eyes twinkling.

"Any Irish blood in your veins, Lord Stranleigh?"

"Oh, yes! My grandmother——" here his lordship paused. It was quite alien to make any boast of his ancestry, and the young man was proud of his grandmother.

"I thought so," commented Wynn. "I had an Irish grandmother, too. To return, however, to our muttons——"

"That's Welsh," said Stranleigh.

"Yes, Welsh and good. No sheep like them, you know. As I intended to remark, all you say about the destruction of wireless stations holds good of the coastguards. A well-aimed shell would knock one of them out of business quite as effectually as it would an electrical installation."

“That is true, sir, but the wireless locations are few, while the coastguard depôts are many. You took a retrograde step in abolishing the coastguards, whereas you should have taken a forward step by supplying all the coastguards with wireless apparatus.”

“That was proposed, my lord, but fortunately overruled.”

“Why fortunately?”

“Because this dream of invasion is a mere nightmare; the effect of ignorant imagination. No foreign country would be so foolhardy as to land men on this island; they’d never get them off again. Invasion is impossible.”

“It has been accomplished in the past, nevertheless.”

“In the past! Pouf! Remember our advance in science and speed of communication.”

“Other nations have advanced as far as we; some of them further. America excels us in invention, and Germany in execution.”

The Right Honourable Dennis Macgregor Wynn leaned back in his chair, and drew a handkerchief across his brow.

“It is really too warm, Stranleigh, to discuss a policy so momentous. Besides, we should never

agree. In any case, I should prefer a cooler debating ground."

Stranleigh rose.

"I am much obliged for your kind reception of me. I realise that I am but an idler, while you are a very busy man."

"A working man, merely. It is the title I am proudest of holding. But you are quite mistaken in thinking my remark was a hint for you to go. Even my enemies admit that I am a plain-spoken person, and if I had wished your departure, I should have said so. There is one subject on which I should like further information. I heard vaguely in the spring that you made some experiments on one of your estates touching the welfare of the unemployed. I should like to know more about that."

"I am sorry to say, sir, it was a complete failure."

"Ah! Were you your own manager?"

"No, I was one of the unemployed. I engaged a very faithful, sympathetic, well-intentioned man as head of the scheme, and quite unknown to him, I accepted a spade and did my share of the digging. I wished to learn what the derelicts thought, from the inside, as it were."

"And what did they think?"

“They don’t think.”

The Minister laughed.

“You are pessimistic, I see, but we must talk further about your project and the cause of its failure. It seems to me that in the hands of the right man it should succeed, that is, premising the scheme were sound. Now, in a couple of weeks I shall take up residence by the sea, in Walmer Castle, which has been very kindly placed at my disposal during the hot weather by my friend, the Warden of the Cinque Ports. I shall have with me some of the minor members of the Government, who are quite interesting, although they hold subordinate positions. I should be delighted if you would spend a week-end with me, when we could thresh out these important matters.”

“Walmer Castle,” mused Stranleigh. “That’s near Deal, isn’t it?”

“Within half a mile of Deal and golf.”

“Well, I’ll visit you if I can, and many thanks for the invitation. I hope the spirit of the ancient stronghold will act upon that Celtic temperament of yours.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why, in Walmer Castle the great of England have resided. The Duke of Wellington died there,

not in luxury, but in a small, bare room, with a mattress and a coverlet on an iron camp bedstead. In a chamber eight feet broad, Premier Pitt and Lord Nelson planned the amazing naval operations that followed. On the lawn grows a willow transplanted from Napoleon's grave. Oh, you'll be surrounded by military memories at Walmer ! Yes, I shall call on you there, even though you will have dungeons at your disposal. Before taking my leave, too long delayed, am I to understand that my intended object-lesson with the coastguard stations has made no impression on your mind ? ”

“ None in the least, Lord Stranleigh, except to recall the adage about parting with money.”

The Minister's smile eliminated the sting from his reference, and Lord Stranleigh smiled in sympathy.

“ I came to-day to place myself at your disposal in case you considered I had infringed the law.”

“ There are many laws that ought to be infringed, my lord, but the present Government hopes to repeal them, and put something newer and more helpful to humanity in their stead. No, Stranleigh, I'm sorry to disappoint your efforts towards economy, but you'll receive no help from me to board and lodging at His Majesty's expense.”

“I see. Now, listen to my final words, Mr. Wynn. Before the summer is past I shall endeavour to prove that you are wrong in a number of the statements you have made. In doing so, I shall try to inflict upon England a humiliation greater than she has ever suffered in her most disastrous war, and so I bid you good-bye, sir, with a renewal of my gratitude for your kind reception.”

“Great heavens, wait a bit, wait a bit ! I want further particulars. What do you propose to do ? Dynamite the Houses of Parliament ?”

“Wait and see,” replied Stranleigh, as with a laugh he let himself out into the lobby.

A fortnight later, the Right Honourable Dennis Macgregor Wynn was at liberty to work in a cooler spot than the narrow thoroughfare of Downing Street. He had taken an afternoon train from London, and in a little over two hours was wandering round the grounds of Walmer Castle, by the sea. It would have been difficult to imagine a more ideal place for the purposes Mr. Wynn had in mind. The Castle was quiet and secluded, situated amidst ample private grounds, and thus free from intrusion. To the front of it lay the broad blue Channel, and to the south-east the sinister Goodwin Sands, which in their time had swallowed up many a

goodly merchant ship, and many a stalwart man-of-war ; thus in a way an object-lesson constantly before the eyes of England's shrewdest politician. No one knew better than Wynn the political quick-sands that surrounded him. He could afford to make no mistakes ; he must overcome Great Britain's latent distrust, which permeated even into his own party. To make his position more sure, he had determined on a series of secret summer conferences, at which he was resolved to say little, but to learn much. He had invited colleagues on whom he could depend, and others of whom he was not certain. On no occasion would any of these meetings assume the seriousness pertaining to a Council of State. Guests were invited in batches of not less than four or more than ten. The length of their stay was definitely fixed, and the reason for the visit was always that everyone needed now and then a sniff of the salt sea.

In the earlier part of the year Wynn had been in a quandary regarding this series of gatherings. His own summer residence was situated on the east coast of Scotland, and was merely a very commonplace marine villa, without either the room or the servants to take care of more than one or two guests at a time. Another objection was the

distance from London and the expense of the journey.

Those whom Wynn wished to meet were in the main poor men, and the question even of railway fare was to many of them a serious one. It was at once an odd and an encouraging thing that people who helped to guide the destinies of a great Empire and one of the richest on earth, had yet to be so economical that the price of a third-class railway ticket from one end of the island to the other was a matter for consideration.

At this point Wynn's friend, the Warden of the Cinque Ports, placed at the Minister's disposal the official Castle of these five harbours, a retreat as secluded as any stronghold in the Highlands, and yet but two hours from London.

During the first few moments of his inspection of this sumptuous residence and its noble park, Wynn could not help feeling exultant that he, born in poverty, in a humble cottage, should in so short a time have risen to such a position that he was owner *pro tem.* of this historic palace, with numerous servants at his disposal, and yet this thought brought with it a disturbing element. Wynn was still a poor man, although in the enjoyment of a salary that a few years ago would have seemed to him wealth.

There are some invitations in England that a poor man dare not accept, no matter how cordially they are given by his would-be host. He cannot accept an invitation to shoot, for the head-keeper will look with disdain at a tip of any amount less than five pounds, and there are a host of others, outdoors and in, who must be solaced with gold. However generous the host may be, he cannot save his guests from these exactions. The traditions of ages are against him. King George decrees that none of his servants showing visitors through Windsor Castle shall receive a tip, yet they receive it, despite the King-Emperor's command.

With a constant influx of guests at Walmer Castle the tips expected would be numerous and heavy. Wynn had some notion of attempting a compromise with the head servant, but he knew it would be *infra dig.* to do this; something not to be ventured by a man in his position, despite his own fixed opinion that the whole system was degrading both to giver and taker. On more than one occasion the Minister had found some pet project come to nought because it ran counter to an ancient custom or prejudice, and although he despised these relics of feudalism, he could not but respect their silent, invisible force of obstruction.

But in the present instance the wind was to be tempered to the shorn lamb, and strangely enough, the amelioration came to him from the head servant at Walmer. Alert as Wynn undoubtedly was, he never suspected that here was an instance of the power of money exerted so as to overcome an old servant's reluctance to do anything out of the ordinary.

The ancient underling who accompanied the Minister in his peregrinations through the estate, pointing out this and that of interest, approached his mission with humble diffidence, and was forced to brace himself up with the memory of gold already received and the anticipation of much larger sums still to come, the total of which would render him financially independent for the rest of his life.

“Have you ever dined, sir, at the Imperial Grand Hotel in London?”

This hostelry was one of the newest and most luxurious with which the metropolis had been endowed. The Minister smiled.

“It’s not a hotel I usually patronise; still, I have been there on one or two occasions.”

“Perhaps you did not notice the head-waiter?”

“I take note of most things I see, and if you are referring to Heinrich, he is one not to be over-

looked ; a world-celebrated man, in fact. Have you seen him ? ”

“ Yes, sir, he was here last week.”

“ Really ! A magnificent-looking man with a splendid golden beard.”

“ Yes, sir, that is the person.”

“ What was he doing at Walmer, and how did they get on without him at the Imperial Grand ? ”

“ Oh, he has left that hotel, sir. He has made his fortune, and purchased a hotel for himself on Lake Lucerne.”

“ Why, Heinrich is getting on in the world. Did he wish you to join him in the Swiss enterprise ? ”

“ Well, so to speak, sir, he did, without any risk on my part.”

“ And are you going ? ”

“ Yes, sir, it’s too good an offer to refuse. I have sent in my resignation to the Warden, but he wants me to stay on while your parties are here.”

“ I’m sorry if I interfere with your advancement, but perhaps Heinrich does not take over the Swiss hotel at once.”

“ He has taken it over already, and some foreign friends of his are in charge, but most of the customers are English, and he wished me there to see to them.”

“ So far as I am concerned, I shall not stand in

your way, if the Warden desires you to remain only until I have gone. If you provide an efficient substitute, you have my consent to leave as soon as you install him."

"That is just the point I was coming to, sir. You see, Heinrich knew nothing of me, but he read in the London papers that you were to be here for some weeks. Now, as he wishes English custom for his Swiss hotel, being, as you remarked, so well-known, he hoped to see you, and make arrangements to look after the catering here while you are in residence."

"Oh, bless my soul!" cried the Minister with a laugh. "I could never rise to anything so magnificent as Heinrich, nor so expensive."

"It was that very thing he was speaking of. The papers said that many celebrated persons would be guests of yours, and Heinrich offered, if the catering was put into his charge, to please you and the most particular of your guests, doing it all for half the amount I have been in the habit of spending, as you can see by my accounts. He would accept no salary himself, and allow no tips to be given or received."

"I'm afraid I could not permit such self-sacrifice on his part."

" 'Twould be the making of him, he said, if next year he might announce with truth that he had catered in England for you and the other distinguished people."

" Oh, I see ! A little advertising plan on Heinrich's part. Would he expect me to write anything on the subject, and sign the same ? "

" No, sir. Nothing further than what you are in the habit of writing about any servant who has given you satisfaction."

" He would understand, I suppose, that he could dismiss none of the help at present employed here ? "

" Of course, sir, but he wished to bring with him a few cooks and assistants."

" Yes, Heinrich would need a *chef* or two. Well, I am quite agreeable, but this is a matter which rests between your master and yourself. If you write to him, and show me a letter from him agreeing, I will give my consent."

Everything passed off according to the old servant's desire, and Heinrich being duly installed, more than made good his promises. The Right Honourable Mr. Wynn found himself relieved of all hospitable anxiety. Every wish of host and guests seemed to be anticipated, and Heinrich's genius for organisation was so complete that the duties

of the household went on as noiselessly and efficiently as the works of a well-oiled watch.

The days began to draw in, and, on the last night of Wynn's occupancy, the electric lights were burning all through the dinner hour. That afternoon Heinrich asked the Minister for any line of commendation that he cared to give, and the *maître d'hôtel* received a written eulogy in Mr. Wynn's well-known hand, which may be seen to-day, sumptuously framed, in the chief public room of Heinrich's hotel on Lake Lucerne.

Including the host, seven sat down to dinner that night, and a very hilarious meal they made of it. At the end Heinrich, with great respect, asked if he might prepare a little tableau for them, and on obtaining enthusiastic permission, he retired, leaving them to their coffee and liqueurs. Suddenly the electric light went out, plunging the dining-room into pitch darkness. Then, amidst great laughter, an invisible finger seemed to write on the wall, after the fashion of those electric signs so familiar to us all.

“Hello!” cried one. “Belshazzar up-to-date!”

“TO BE OPULENT AND UNARMED IS TO SECURE EASE IN THE PRESENT AT THE ALMOST CERTAIN COST OF DISASTER IN THE FUTURE.”

There was a pause, and then, in admirable imitation of the statesman's chirography, in letters of white fire, appeared the word—

“ ROOSEVELT.”

Applause rang out loud and long. The handwriting on the wall disappeared, leaving the room once more in darkness, then the regular lights were switched on. With his back to the door furthest from the Minister stood Heinrich in new splendour, arrayed in the uniform of a captain of Bavarian Guards. Along each side of the table stood like statues a dozen men, also in foreign regimentals. The butt ends of their rifles rested on the floor; the glow of electric lamps shone like summer lightning on their well-polished bayonets.

“ Gentlemen,” said Heinrich quietly, “ you are my prisoners.”

The diners looked at one another, and at their host, who sat impassive at the head of the table.

“ Heinrich ! ” he said.

“ Captain, sir, if you please.”

“ Very well, captain. We are quite pleased with your tableau. You may now withdraw, and take your men with you.”

So accustomed was the captain to obedience, and to the carrying-out of orders, that his first motion

was towards compliance, then military discipline asserted itself. He spoke with decision.

“Just as you sat down to dinner the Earl of Stranleigh’s yacht arrived outside, as near as possible to the shore. During the meal she landed, in her three boats, these twenty-four men, who entered this Castle unobserved. You will credit that, knowing my talent for organisation. All the English servants about the place have leave of absence for to-night, and are enjoying themselves at Deal, where a performance of ‘An Englishman’s Home’ is being given. I presented each of them with a ticket.”

“Burke, the telephone!” whispered the Right Honourable. “Police!”

Burke sprang to his feet, and instantly three bayonets fell to the level of his breast, whereat he paused.

“Sit down, Mr. Burke,” said the captain. “All this is foolishness. There are but two courses open to you. Either you go quietly with us to Earl Stranleigh’s yacht, like gentlemen, and if there is any quarrel about our action, settle it with your countryman, his lordship; or make a futile resistance and go to the yacht trussed like so many fowls sent into the kitchen¹ of the Imperial Grand Hotel. Choose!”

The Right Honourable arose.

“Such a choice, Captain Heinrich, does not take long to make. We will go with you quietly if you allow me to get certain of my belongings from my room.”

Heinrich bowed with dignity.

“Everything belonging to you, sir, and to these six gentlemen, is already on board the yacht.”

“The deuce you say!” replied Wynn. “You are an admirable servant, Heinrich.”

“Thank you, sir. I hope to prove so when my country is my master.”

He marshalled them down to the beach, where three boats awaited them. It was arranged that the seven prisoners should go to the yacht on the first trip of the boats, with sufficient guard in each craft, whilst Heinrich and the remainder of his men were taken on the second journey. Wynn and his secretary, Burke, sat together in silence; then the younger man spoke.

“We’ll make Stranleigh sweat for this, were he a thousand times an earl!”

“Alas!” cried Wynn, “that is the grinding part of it. We daren’t open our mouths. Ridicule kills, in England as elsewhere. We dare not make ourselves the laughing-stock of the Empire.”

As the strenuous section of the Cabinet came up the ship's water-stairway, Lord Stranleigh received them on deck with great cordiality.

"I am delighted to meet you again, Mr. Wynn. We can now in comfort finish our discussion on Governmental affairs. I believe that England never before suffered the humiliation in any war of having a portion of her Government captured. But I assure you that your detention may be as long or as short as you choose it to be. To-morrow's London papers will announce that the Right Honourable Dennis Macgregor Wynn and his party, having concluded their visit to Walmer Castle, accepted the invitation of the Earl of Stranleigh for a brief voyage along the coast, in his yacht. As this yacht is fitted with a powerful installation of wireless telegraphy, Lord Stranleigh has secured a special Government operator in addition to the one he always carries, and thus the members of the Cabinet aboard will be in constant touch with Downing Street.

"And now, Mr. Wynn, you are at liberty to telegraph anything you like to anybody; there is no censorship on my yacht. I am compelled to make a run to Hamburg, to put ashore the picturesque Bavarians who accompanied you hither. After that I shall steer direct for London, or any other port

you name, or if you will consent to be my guests, I should be delighted to give you a run completely round the island.

“ Gentlemen, cooling and refreshing drinks are set out on the table in the music-room, or you may order what you like here on deck. See how beautiful the lights of Deal look as we pass them, like a string of pearls.”

“ I didn’t notice we had got under way,” said the Minister, “ but I see now either Deal is going west, or we are moving east.”

“ We’ve twin-screw turbines, you know. Wait till we develop full speed.”

“ I will,” replied the Minister, with a sigh.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WHEAT PIT.

“ As I walk along the Bois de Boulogne
With an independent air,
You should see the people stare,
You should hear them all declare,
Di-dum-di-dum-di-diddeldy-dum-
Da-di-do-di-dum-dare
There’s the man that broke the bank at Monte Carlo.”

STRANLEIGH was sitting in his library meditating when the joyous strains that accompany the above effort grew louder and louder as they progressed through the house, until the door opened and Blake walked in, looking very spruce and well-groomed, with hat slightly tilted on one side, as becomes a man with a good opinion of himself.

“ Oh, I beg pardon,” he cried, taking off his head-gear. “ I thought the house was empty.”

“ It is, Blake, it is ; for empty-headedness on the part of inmates does not fill a house. Wherefore

this ancient ditty from the lips of an up-to-date young man ? ”

“ I’ve forgotten some words of the elegy, but the main theme applies to yours truly. I’ve done a great stroke of business. Pulled it off with *eclat* ; with these claws, in fact ”—he spread out his fingers all a-crook—“ and I approach you with hands full of boodle, metaphorically speaking.”

“ Had a stroke of luck, eh ? ”

“ Luck ? Not on your life. Does a man equipped with my brain power require the blind assistance of luck ? Not so ; my fortune has come to me through deep calculation ; through my accurate and extensive knowledge of human nature. It was a *coup*, carefully planned, and the proceeds are now in my bank, subject to my order. I address Lord Stranleigh on terms of equality, as rich man talking to rich man.”

“ Great heavens ! This is astonishing. Elucidate ! ”

“ Do you remember telling me that the then foreshadowed oil boom would speedily collapse ? ”

“ Yes ; that was six weeks ago.”

“ Precisely. The moment I realised that was your deliberate opinion, I gathered together everything I possessed, and plunged it into oil. If Lord

Stranleigh, unprompted by anybody, came to a conclusion, I knew that conclusion must be wrong, so I went in for all I was worth on the other side. Hence my wealth now greatly exceeds yours."

"There seems to be a touch of brag about that statement."

"Do not misapprehend me. I did not say I have more money than you have. I merely said I was better off. You see, there are so many things I don't want. I have no use for a steam yacht, for estates in most of the shires, for thoroughbred horses, and all such. My desires are moderate. Besides, I am blessed with common-sense, and know how to use my money; therefore, behold the man of real affluence."

"Well, Blake, I'm very glad to hear it. There is much in what you say about desire, but I hope you are not palming those sentiments off on me as something new: they belong, really, to old Epicurus. And now I suppose you have come formally to tender your resignation?"

"No; I don't intend to dismiss you as master just yet. I rather like my job, and I certainly like you."

Stranleigh smiled.

"Mutual," he remarked.

"I feel in a position now, however, to say disagreeable things with more confidence than has hitherto been the case."

"I'm sure I never objected to them, and I hope you are not under the illusion that you have refrained from them during the past."

"Perhaps not, perhaps not. You see, I had a sort of free and independent training. I am first of all a journalist, and a secretary only in a secondary capacity. As a journalist I hate to see futility around me. I wish to talk with you like a rich uncle on the failure of your last two schemes."

"If you so dislike futility, may I point out that the proper time to have spoken was before my plans were put into practice?"

"Ah, yes; but before they were put into practice I was merely a poor, sweated minion of my lord. Now I address you as a man of substance."

"All right. Go ahead. I know from experience you can't be stopped, but before you begin, I should like to protest against your calling my last scheme a failure. I did what I set out to do. I captured the most obstreperous section of the Government, and straightway kidnapped the contingent. I gave them an object lesson that won't be forgotten."

“Don’t flatter yourself, Lord Stranleigh. You gave them a delightful voyage in a luxurious yacht. You made no impression on the minds of any one of them, as Wynn told you.”

“Oh, Wynn! He’s not the only toad in the puddle, or perhaps, speaking of Walmer, I should say the only pebble on the beach. I certainly excited the interest of the Right Honourable Kirkstall Wilmot, who is younger than Wynn, and much more enterprising. He told me, before I put him ashore, that National Defence, in his mind, was the most important issue at stake, and it may surprise you to know I am waiting here for him at this moment. He wishes to discuss the matter with me unembarrassed by the presence of his colleagues.”

“That’s Wilmot all over! He’s never happy unless he’s undermining. Everyone knows what his ambition is.”

“Ah, you’re wavering from the subject, Blake. You asserted that I made no impression, and I’m proving to you that I did.”

“Only one thing on earth, Lord Stranleigh, will arouse the serious attention of a politician, and that is: what effect will this or the other action exert on the voter. This brings me to

what I wished to tell you. You failed to call to your assistance the greatest power on earth."

"Money? Why, I spent money like water."

"Oh, money is a mere inert mass. Within itself it has no potency. It is a tool, useful only in the hands of a man with knowledge and brains."

"Thanks, Blake. Go on; what, then, is the greatest power on earth?"

"The power of the Press, my lord and master. You were astonished at the result of advertising for an idea; at the instant response; at the bagful after bagful of letters. Now suppose for a moment that you had realised the treasure you possess in me, a veteran journalist. Suppose, when you bought those coastguard stations, you had said to me—

"How can we hitch our waggon to the Press?"

"I should instantly have tipped the wink to one or two of our most enterprising papers; not baldly, as if I wanted anything from them, but in a distressful, hesitating, puzzled sort of way. I should have begun something like this—

"That's an amazing thing Lord Stranleigh has done. I wonder what will be the outcome?"

"Newspaper ears would at once be on the alert, and instead of having to force information into them, I should find myself embodying 'good copy,'

the one thing on earth that an enterprising reporter is looking out for. I should hesitate, and appeals would be made to me.

“‘ What is Stranleigh trying to do ? ’ the reporters would ask.

“ Why, you see the result at once. An instant furore in the Press, for and against you. Questions asked in Parliament, receiving evasive replies from Ministers. Pictures in the papers of the purchased coastguard stations ; pictures of old coastguardsmen ; pictures of the foreigners installed by Stranleigh ; portraits of Stranleigh himself (*a*) as the saviour of his country, (*b*) as a traitor who should be hanged. Wild excitement throughout the land when the villain Stranleigh spirits these foreigners away from their posts, and places them outside the range of English law. Why, it makes my blood boil with indignation when I think of such good material wasted. And then you’d have made the Government sit up, instead of which your project fizzled out like a damp squib.”

“ My dear Blake, you wax eloquent. I’d no idea so much enthusiasm was concealed behind such an unprepossessing exterior.”

“ I said you didn’t appreciate me.”

“ Very well, Blake. Such neglect of soaring

genius shall no longer be attributed to me. I confess I'm rather tired of saving my country. Nevertheless, if the Right Honourable Kirkstall Wilmot propounds some feasible plan that he himself lacks the money to carry out, I'll finance him. I shall propose to enlist the co-operation of the Press, and if he does not object, you are hereby appointed our Publicity Agent."

"Right you are! I'll make the sparks fly!"

There was a gentle tap at the door, after which Ponderby entered softly.

"The Right Honourable Kirkstall Wilmot, my lord."

"Very good. Bring him in, Ponderby. And now, Blake, this is a private conference. Cut away and enjoy your newly-won riches."

Stranleigh had dignified the meeting by applying to it the word "conference," but "monologue" would have been a better name. The Minister was not much older than Stranleigh himself, but centuries of experience seemed to add weight to his words. His face, without being strong, might be termed aggressive, and was in marked contrast to the placid countenance of the young nobleman, while his manner was almost domineering. If the world but paid attention to the wishes of the Right

Honourable Kirkstall Wilmot, we should indeed be living in an earthly Paradise. Everything wrong between nations took its rise in neglect to consult Wilmot.

“Good morning, Stranleigh!” he cried. “It is very good of you to receive me in this friendly way. Very good; very good indeed.”

Even Stranleigh’s enemies, if he had any, would admit that he was not such a fool as he looked. The insincerity of the Minister’s greeting did not escape him. The words the Right Honourable should have used were—

“You are highly honoured by my visit”; and Stranleigh, standing, replied to the unspoken sentence and not to the one uttered.

“The honour is mine, Mr. Wilmot. Won’t you take a chair?”

Both sat down, but the member of the Cabinet apparently was not at ease unless on his feet. His tones and his gestures were those of a man addressing an audience, and the speaker with an oratorical voice required a platform to march on. It was one of the Right Honourable’s habits to walk about with his hands underneath his constantly-agitated coat-tails, reminding modern auditors of Chantecleer thinking he was causing the sun to rise,

which, after all, was a likeness not far out of the way. To older people he recalled John B. Gough, the temperance lecturer, who began a discourse with almost trembling diffidence, but who roused the coldest audience the moment his coat-tails commenced to wave. This similitude was defective in one particular. Kirkstall Wilmot never suffered from moments of diffidence, trembling or otherwise.

“I’ve learned from Wynn the particulars about your venture regarding the coastguard stations, and of course I was one of the seven whom you kidnapped, so needed no account of that at second-hand. Now, you’d have been saved all the trouble you’ve taken if you had studied the subject deeply enough to acquaint yourself with the fact that an invasion of England is impossible. Perhaps you are prepared to admit that your two attempts to influence the mind of the Government have been neither more nor less than ghastly failures.”

“Oh, yes ; some friends of mine have been kind enough to point that out.”

“Very good. Would you, then, be content to hear where the real danger lies ? ”

“Most interested, I’m sure.”

“Have you ever visited Malta, or Gibraltar ? ”

“Both places, several times.”

“ Were you shown the grain supply at either ? ”

“ Can’t remember that I was.”

“ No matter. Malta and Gibraltar possess store-houses, cellarage, in fact, containing grain to feed the population for years in case of a siege ; yet here’s our own home island unprovided with any Government storehouse of food. The fate of England, in case of a European war against her, will hang on the food supply ; not on the question of invasion. England could be starved into surrender in a very few weeks. When you remember what a single steamer like the *Alabama* did, practically wiping off the ocean all the United States shipping, imagine what might be accomplished by the German mercantile marine, with its magnificent fleet of fast steamships, excelling in speed anything on the waters except less than half-a-dozen of our own. One well-placed shot would sink a grain ship, and these huge boats of the German-Lloyd and Hamburg-American lines could carry enough coal and provisions to keep them at sea for weeks, if not months, and after the first dozen or so food-ships were destroyed, no grain tramp would venture out from the American ports.”

“ But what would our fleet be doing all this time ? ”

“ Our fleet couldn’t catch them.”

“Torpedo-boat destroyers could.”

“But hang it all, man, our torpedo-boat destroyers can’t live in mid-Atlantic, and if they could, have no coal storage sufficient for such a voyage. Mid-Atlantic, do I say? Why, these German boats could cruise just outside the three mile limit, fronting every principal port in North or South America from which wheat could be shipped, and nab the grain boats before they were five miles away from home.”

“Not if the grain boats flew the American flag.”

“Food is contraband of war, and the grain vessels would have to take their own risks. During the Civil War blockade-runners were destroyed by the United States, no matter what flag they flew.”

“Granting all this is true——”

“Granting? Why, of course it’s true, every word of it. These islands could be starved into surrender within a month.”

“I’m afraid you exaggerate, Mr. Wilmot. I myself have seen a man who fasted sixty days and was still in the ring.”

The Right Honourable treated this interruption with the scorn that it deserved.

“You are making light of a serious question,” he said, severely. “If the people of this country

fasted for half the time, in what condition would they be to repel an invasion? But let us get back to common-sense. Here's the case in a nutshell. I want some rich man to do in private what the Government should do in public, only on a much smaller scale, of course. I want him to build a huge granary, say on the Yorkshire moors, where land is cheap, and fill this granary with American wheat."

"I'm quite willing, if you tell me what to do with the wheat, once I secure it."

"Sell it."

"Oh, I am to become a grain merchant, then? I doubt whether I am qualified to shine in that line."

"My dear Stranleigh, if you would allow me to develop the plan, before you pass judgment upon it, we should save much valuable time. You cannot take up a well-thought-out scheme, and criticise the first detail without knowing anything of what follows."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Wilmot. Your reproof is merited. I cease to interrupt, and will remain dumb until you have finished."

"Very good. My project settles the invasion question, settles the tariff question, settles the cheap and dear loaf question, settles the unemploy-

ment question, brings steady prosperity to our dominions over sea, while at the same time it places our industries at home upon a solid foundation."

"Great heavens!" murmured Stranleigh under his breath, but not loud enough for his confident visitor to overhear.

"I'm not a man who looks upon merely one item in a programme. No design stands by itself. It interlocks with others, and our narrow-minded politicians make the mistake of concentrating their attention on one link in the chain, whereas the statesman views the chain as a whole. Now, perhaps you do not know that a Canadian farmer is prosperous if he receives a dollar a bushel for his wheat. If you eliminate the middlemen, and deal direct with the farmer, you can give him his dollar a bushel, and sell wheat in England at a price that will produce the cheapest loaf we have consumed during the past century; thus, with one hand you bestow prosperity upon the Canadian farmer, while with the other you pass on a loaf to the British consumer at the lowest rate he has ever enjoyed. Our manufacturing industries are placed on the solid foundation of the best and cheapest food, while the agitation on the tariff is, in consequence, crushed.

“Now, as to the unemployed question. Modern science and the increased use of concrete bring building operations within the range of unskilled labour. The erection of these granaries would merely mean the mixing of mortar and shovelling it into moulds. You could lodge your men, drafted in from the overcrowded cities, in tents at first, and afterwards they might build their own huts. Fresh air and good plain food, with steady labour, and the discipline of an army, would make men of them; strong and capable citizens.”

Stranleigh here made a note on a sheet of paper before him, but said nothing. The Minister went on with ever-increasing enthusiasm.

“When this organisation got into full swing you, at its head, would have given yourself a task fitted for a beneficent Napoleon, and I’m not sure but commercially it would pay, although that is not the object we have in view. In one way it would be similar to those great engineering projects successfully carried out in Western America, where water is stored, held back by gigantic dams, and distributed over the deserts in irrigation, turning those deserts into flowering and fruitful gardens, a line of activity with which our greatest men might be proud to be connected.”

The Minister ceased his perambulations, and now faced his auditor, and

“Silence like a poultice came
To heal the blows of sound.”

“Your policy does not lack comprehensiveness,” said Stranleigh quietly. “As you say, any man might be proud to carry out such a useful work. I have made a few notes of points on which I should like further enlightenment. Your Canadian farmer is scattered over millions of square miles. You could, of course, by the expensive means of agents, or the cheaper form of correspondence, enter into agreements with him. He might enforce those agreements on you, but how could you, except at ruinous expense, make him keep his side of the bargain? If the market price of wheat in Canada was, say, seventy cents a bushel, he would gladly sell to you for a dollar, and you could get all the grain there was in the country. But suppose the price rose to a dollar-and-a-half a bushel, he would in most cases, bargain or no bargain, take the ready cash of the local dealer.”

Wilmot waved aside the suggestion with a gesture of dismissal.

“Oh, that is a mere detail. The Canadian farmer rarely gets a dollar for his wheat. A corner

now and then unduly forces up its price, but the advance is strictly temporary, and even at its height, the farmer seldom benefits. The jumping cost is always the work of the middleman, whom we would gradually eliminate. At first, of course, we should be troubled by him, but we should merely cease for the moment to purchase, and wait till the clouds rolled past. Or, we might at the beginning adopt the Biblical plan ; buy in the years of cheapness, and refrain when the purchase involved too great a loss."

As he continued, Stranleigh grew more and more amazed. What a magnificent revivalist preacher this man would have made, had he not turned aside to politics ! He quoted as if he knew the whole Book by heart, the words rolling sonorously from his tongue without ever a break or a mistake.

“ ‘ Now therefore let Pharaoh look out a man discreet and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt.

“ ‘ Let Pharaoh do this, and let him appoint officers over the land, and take up the fifth part of the land of Egypt in the seven plenteous years.

“ ‘ And let them gather all the food of those good years that come, and lay up corn under the hand of Pharaoh, and let them keep food in the cities.

“‘ And that food shall be for store to the land against the seven years of famine, which shall be in the land of Egypt ; that the land perish not through the famine.

“‘ And the thing was good in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of all his servants.

“‘ And Pharaoh said unto his servants, can we find such a one as this is, a man in whom the Spirit of God is ?

“‘ And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, Forasmuch as God hath shewed thee all this, there is none so wise and discreet as thou art.’ ”

“ Well,” said Stranleigh with a smile, “ I never flattered myself that I was qualified to enact the part of Joseph. However, we will let that pass, and tackle my next difficulty. I have recently had an opportunity of testing the working capacity of the unemployed.”

“ Yes,” interrupted Wilmot, “ Wynn told me about it.”

“ Then there is no need for me to recapitulate. I disbelieve in either the energy or industry of the unemployed.”

“ Ah, that is merely your own lack of faith.”

“ No, it is my own lesson of experience.”

“ All you required was military discipline.”

“ I daresay, but I have no authority to discipline an unwilling worker. Even in the Army, an officer is not allowed to strike a soldier.”

“ True, nevertheless, you could exercise discipline if only you went the right way about it.”

“ What is the right way, Mr. Wilmot ? ”

“ Do you know what contracting out means ? ”

“ I’m afraid I don’t.”

“ Well, roughly speaking, it is this. Any rights a man possesses he may dispose of, this being a free country. You’ve no right to strike a man in the face with your fist, yet if a man permits you to do so, or sells you the right to do so, who is to prevent you ? Prize-fighting is an illegal sport, but boxing with gloves is not, and a man may be very severely punished by the latter method. Having your consent I might knock you insensible with gloves on my fists. Without your consent the placing of my finger on your shoulder is illegal assault. A man by contract may give you the liberty of punishment.”

“ Do you mean to say that if a man was contracted out I might legally encompass his death ? ”

“ Oh, nonsense, Stranleigh, you’re going to extremes. Of course you couldn’t. Where your

unemployed experiment failed was in this: you were not paying your men wages. You could therefore exercise no control over them. In the case we are discussing I should expect you to pay high wages, and through the method of contracting out, to arm yourself with the power of discipline, which must, of course, take a reasonable form."

"As, for example?"

"Well, the pillory was made illegal by statute 7 Will. IV. and 1 Vict. c. 23 in 1837. Stocks have become obsolete, but I do not think they are illegal. They are still existent in many English villages, and I believe, without being sure, that a magistrate could sentence a prisoner to them. They would be more in our line, because they have always been associated with labour. It was the Statute of Labourers that brought them into being in the reign of Edward III., and labourers mostly occupied them, principally for breaches of the Sunday Observance Act, walking too far, going fishing, or things like that; also on tramps who never would labour. Even in the United States they were used, especially during slavery days. It seems to me rather a pity that stocks have gone out of use, for they cause no physical hurt, the damage to a prisoner

arising merely from the jeers of his comrades. I'll look up the legal status of stocks."

"Well, see that you look them up carefully, for I have often had my feelings hurt with them on the Stock Exchange."

The Minister righteously did not smile. He was a most serious man for one so young, and gave no countenance to flippancy.

"Will you go in for my plan?" he demanded brusquely.

"Yes; under your direction, and in moderation. You cannot expect me to plunge as if I were the British Government."

"Certainly not; certainly not. I shall be glad to direct, only my name must not be connected with the affair; at least, not for the present."

Stranleigh smiled.

"That is a matter of course. I shall take the blame in case of failure; you will get the credit if the project is a success."

"Oh, I don't mean that at all, but no matter. When will you begin?"

"At once."

"Right. I do like promptness. Well, good-bye, Stranleigh. I'm very pleased to have met you."

"And I you," said his lordship, rising.

The Right Honourable Kirkstall Wilmot, as has been remarked, was a very busy man, and Stranleigh had no further communication with him. Politics means a continual fight and unrelenting vigilance on the part of those engaged in it, and Stranleigh saw by the papers that Wilmot was doing even more than his share. The seed the Minister had sown fell on good ground, for although his lordship was as indolent as the other was active, he occupied the delightful position of a wealthy man who had merely to give orders and see them efficiently carried out. Blake was the buffer between him and strenuous exertion, and the ex-journalist entered the fray with a vim, especially when he learned that he would have the privilege of dealing with workmen who, in case of any malingering, could be punished satisfactorily.

Not hearing from the Right Honourable regarding the legality of stocks, his lordship asked Blake to make investigation, and the solicitor whom Blake consulted said that if any man liked to pay the wages, he could place stocks all over his estate and hire men to sit in them.

So, presently, architects and builders were at work on the Yorkshire moors. The army tents stored away at Lannacombe coastguard station

were set up near the site of the first granary, and two or three hundred out-of-work labourers were requisitioned from Manchester.

Curiously enough, the stocks were a great success. The first sloucher called upon to undergo punishment made light of it.

“ Why, blimey ! ” he cried, “ I could do this on me ’ead ” (which, by the way, he couldn’t ; a man has to sit down when his ankles are in the stocks). “ This is a bit of all right. I can smoke my pipe, read my paper, and ’ave a nap of sleep.”

Indeed, taking it all in all, the punishment seemed childish in its mildness, but there is one thing that it takes a philosopher to stand, and few labourers dabble much in philosophy. This one thing is ridicule. During the noon hour, the man in the stocks found another side to the question. He was unmercifully chaffed ; often so brutally that had his limbs been clear he would have knocked down the joker. He writhed in his helplessness, and quite unable intellectually to cope with the united wits of the company, he fell back on lurid profanity, which merely made his tormentors laugh the louder and goad him the more.

From this first trial the stocks became a terror that a man would do anything, even hard work,

to avoid. Stranleigh believed he had found the missing ingredient of the mixture that would solve the unemployed question. Building went on merrily, and as there were no taverns within twenty miles, the men soon began to present a gratifying improvement in physique, just as the Right Honourable predicted would be the case.

At the proper moment Blake turned on his newspaper contingent, and Stranleigh went back to town fully satisfied with the outlook of the great experiment he had begun. One morning at breakfast the young nobleman shook open a largely circulated London morning paper, and despite his usual nonchalance, his eyes opened widely as he saw his own name scattered over the broad sheet, and read the startling headings which introduced a long and bitter article.

“SLAVERY IN ENGLAND.

APPALLING DISCOVERY ON THE YORKSHIRE MOORS.

WELL-NIGH INCREDIBLE ACTION BY A NOTORIOUS
MEMBER OF THE NOBILITY.

EARL STRANLEIGH OF WYCHWOOD AND HIS FIVE
HUNDRED WHITE SLAVES.

GRINDING LABOUR. HORRIBLE TORTURE. ILLEGAL
PUNISHMENTS. CRUELTIES THAT WOULD
HAVE MADE NERO BLUSH.”

With compressed lips the young man read the lurid, soul-chilling narrative that followed. By an unexampled stroke of enterprise this journal had been enabled to ferret out a slave colony in the very centre, as one might say, of free England ; the land that had poured out blood and treasure to suppress the slave traffic in distant lands ; the country that had given birth to Wilberforce, to John Bright, to Gladstone, and so forth, and so forth ; the land of a thousand pulpits, where every Sabbath day the blessings of peace and freedom were prayed for. Yet in this land, and in an isolated portion of its largest county, nearly five hundred men toiled incessantly, day in and day out, far removed from any civilising influence. Thirty miles from a school or a church, living first in tents, and later in a compound built by their own seared hands, could be found slaves working under the hypocritical designation of contract labour. Ancient tortures that England shuddered under the very remembrance of had been reintroduced, in order to quell rebellion in the souls of white men doomed to bondage. And all for what ? For the further enrichment of Lord Stranleigh, already computed to be the wealthiest man in the British Empire ; a man who never in his life had done a day's useful

work, but battened on the sufferings and toil of others. Here followed a drastic picture of the men in the stocks, for, as Stranleigh now suspected, Blake, in his over-zeal, had filled up all the stocks to make the sight more impressive, bribing the men with unlimited beer to such an extent that most of them had fallen asleep, which apparently made the unaccustomed London reporters believe they had fainted, or had become comatose through torture, for the description of their swollen ankles and distorted faces was certainly enough to shock humanity.

Next day England rang with the news, and for once Stranleigh had roused the country from end to end. The third day he was arrested, and it required all the legal ability of his defenders to persuade the Court to accept bail. The great pulsing hearts of the public beat in unison on this matter, and the victims at once became the heroes of the land. Each entered a civil suit for damages, and in no case was the verdict less than a thousand pounds. One judge expressed his regret that he was unable to put Stranleigh himself in the stocks for at least a month. Practically the whole Press fell a victim to the slavery scare, although the comments of foreign journals showed that this was a craze which cut two ways. In these

sheets the horrible Stranleigh was held up as a typical Britisher, who had been found out. The English Press had given them the weapons, and quotation was free. Foreigners had no difficulty in showing what a mob of howling hypocrites the British really were, so freely censuring other countries, pretending to be virtuous and all that, when this hideous cancer festered in their own bosom.

Patrick O'Finney arose from his place in Parliament, amidst the cheers of his compatriots, and asked a question of the Rt. Hon. Kirkstall Wilmot.

“ Does the Government intend to take action with regard to the case of Lord Stranleigh, and if so, what action ? The damages awarded against such a rich man as his lordship, large though their total amount appeared to be, was quite inadequate punishment for a crime so atrocious. Every humane man must in his own heart hope that drastic punishment be meted out to this titled scoundrel.”

Mr. O'Finney sat down amidst cheers from every part of the House of Commons. There was deep silence as the Right Honourable Kirkstall Wilmot rose to his feet. He spoke in a voice of solemnity which fitted the occasion.

“ The information in possession of the Government does not accord exactly with the sensational

accounts already published in the daily Press. We have not yet heard Lord Stranleigh in his own defence. (A voice : 'There is no defence').

"I quite agree there can be no defence if even a tithe of that we have read with aching hearts is true. A mere reference to this inexplicable action causes me the deepest pain, and for once I find myself bereft of words with which adequately to portray my abhorrence of the abominable proceedings in Yorkshire (loud cheers, during which the orator visibly struggled with his emotions). I have given much serious thought to this most regrettable affair, and the conclusion I have come to, not without expert advice, is that Lord Stranleigh suffers from mental derangement, and can hardly be held accountable for his actions. The Government has seen to it that all his victims were fully compensated and set at liberty, and this aside from the verdicts so justly awarded against him."

The Right Honourable Kirkstall Wilmot's speech called forth universal acclaim, and although one or two malcontents expressed a desire to see Stranleigh put in prison, crazy or not, it was generally agreed that the dignified demeanour and solemn sentences of the Minister were worthy of the best traditions of the House of Commons.

CHAPTER IX.

WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK.

AT the edge of the wood which skirted that section of Stranleigh Park surrounding the Manor-house, and in the deep shadow of fringing trees, young Lord Stranleigh lay stretched out, a picture of indolence, on sward as green as the Emerald Isle, and soft as a Persian carpet. The summer heat caused him to abandon the knickerbocker suit of faded Harris tweed that all his underlings thought scandalous for a nobleman to wear, and he had put on a scarcely more respectable costume of Oxford boating flannels that had once been white, with a blazer sporting the arms of his College. Around his waist was knotted a scarf, many-hued like Joseph's coat, and his cravat was red as the flag of an anarchist procession. His fingers were interlaced behind his head, and he gazed up at the blue sky flecked by little white clouds that promised continued good weather.

A person so attired in boating garb should have been reclining in a punt, or on the banks of the Thames, but Stranleigh felt compensated for that celebrated river's remoteness by a subdued murmur from the waterfall in the forest depths, where the crystal flood of his favourite trout stream took a header over rocks into a deep pool secluded in the green glade.

Stranleigh congratulated himself that he was not in London on such a day, and that no London men were within calling distance. He remembered dreamily that nothing more strenuous was ahead of him than the casting of a fly upon the stream as evening approached, and evening was still a long way off. As he thought of this pleasure, an extra wave of laziness swept over him, and he sleepily estimated that the day was too clear and bright for the successful capture of trout.

The silence was so intense that he distinguished afar off the sound of carriage wheels, and even the clop-clop-clop of a loosened horse-shoe on the hard high road. Then there was a pause, just long enough for the Park gate to be opened, and Stranleigh partially roused himself, hoping this was no visitor, consoled by the thought, a minute later, that very few people knew where he was.

Presently he saw, slowly ascending the carriage drive, one of the railway station vehicles, and seated within a man of painfully respectable appearance, wearing a tall silk hat.

Stranleigh murmured an exclamation, for uttering which, according to the public Press, a delinquent had been fined one pound a few days before. It was therefore to his financial advantage that there were no listeners. He lay down once more, resolved to refuse audience if any of his servants discovered him, and order that the visitor be turned over to the new bailiff who had taken Wilson's place. He was just dropping into a doze again when one of his men aroused him.

"My lord : Mr. Peter Mackeller wishes to know if you will receive him."

"H'm ! Did anyone inform Mr. Peter Mackeller I was at home ? "

"He seemed to know your lordship was in residence."

"Hang it all, I'm not in residence ; I'm in flannels." He sighed deeply. "Bring Mr. Mackeller here."

As Peter approached, Stranleigh sat up and looked at him. The visitor's conductor disappeared down the hill, leaving the two young men together.

"Well, you are a sight!" was Stranleigh's greeting.

Mackeller glanced nervously at his costume.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Wrong? Everything. That apparel belongs to Piccadilly at about five o'clock in the afternoon, or, worse still, it pertains to the region of Threadneedle Street. You look like a prosperous banker who has lost his bearings in the country, and also lost his luggage."

"Well," said Mackeller deliberately, looking Stranleigh over, "your clothes are nothing to boast of."

"Maybe not, but they hang loose on me, and they fit in with the landscape. *You* are a blot on one of Nature's fairest scenes. I hope you have got knickerbockers in your bag."

"I didn't bring a bag. I'm returning by the 4.20 train."

"I'll lend you an old cap," continued Stranleigh, unheeding. "I never can stand that topper you're wearing. I'm at this moment resisting an almost uncontrollable temptation to bash it down over your eyes."

"I'm going back on the 4.20," reiterated Mackeller. Stranleigh rose to his feet.

"Who's your tailor?" he asked.

" You ought to know. You recommended him to me."

" Oh, you mean Dressley & Sons ? That's all right. I'll telegraph them to send on a few summer and country outfits by the five o'clock train from London. They've got your measure, and I'm taking it now. Never did I see such a ludicrous misfit as Peter Mackeller attempting to imitate a Pall Mall swell out here in Nature's green and simple country. To think, Peter, that I am responsible for this ! I recommended the tailor ! Great heavens ; do you remember the time on the yacht when I had such trouble inducing you to wear evening clothes, and to think it should come to this. Oh, what a fall is here, my countrymen ! Well, never mind, I'll soon have you rigged out sanely. You're merely dreaming about the 4.20 train. You look haggard and careworn, Peter, despite the fact that Solomon in all his glory never wore a topper like that, so you'll stop with me a few days and recuperate."

" Thank you, Stranleigh, but it's impossible. I'm here on business."

" Oh, I can see that all right enough. To transact business with me just now would be difficult in any case, but it is utterly out of the question

when you are costumed like a banker. You'd take advantage of me."

"It's rather odd," commented Mackeller musingly, "that you should reiterate the word 'banker.' "

"I use it," said Stranleigh, "as a term of reproach. Don't sadden me by saying you have become one."

"Yes; I have."

"Oh, this is too much! A double blow, as one might say, when your clothes alone were more than I could bear. I hoped you were merely acting the part. I'd like to ask you to sit here on the grass with me, but that would stain green your too, too beautiful coat and trousers. Let's saunter down to the house, where I may send off that telegram. I do not know the resources of my own wardrobe, but perhaps I may fit you out with suitable togs. I am slightly taller than you are, but that is equalised by you being slightly stouter than I am. Let us therefore make the wardrobe our happy hunting ground, fortified by the knowledge that nothing we can find there will be so grotesque as what you are now wearing."

"I think I told you, Stranleigh, that I intend to catch the 4.20. I must be in London this evening."

"London, my dear Peter, will be happier and more contented without you, while you will be

purer and better for a night spent in the the healthful, innocent country."

Mackeller made a gesture of impatience. He was always a serious man, who would endure a certain amount of flippancy, but speedily knew when he had had enough. He said very slowly, measuring off his words, as if explaining a simple problem to a child:—

" My dear Lord Stranleigh, the tyranny of business demands that I should be in my office at nine o'clock to-morrow morning."

" Oh, you're just saying that to seem important. It's all brag. If you weren't Scotch, I should go so far as to say it was bounce. One difference between us is that I know what I'm talking about, and you don't. This visit of yours, it becomes more and more apparent to me, is not one of friendship, as might have been the case."

" If I were not a friend of yours, Lord Stranleigh, I shouldn't be here."

" Evasion, evasion, Peter. What I mean is that you call on business. Is not that so ? "

" Certainly it is so."

" Very well. You do not wish to return to London without accomplishing that quest on which you come ? "

“That also is true.”

“This happens to be one of the days when I do not transact business. The sky is too blue, the birds are singing too sweetly, the murmur of the water is too cooling and soothing, for any sane man to plunge into business. Business to-morrow, Mackeller, but never business to-day.”

By this time they had arrived at the house, and Stranleigh saw, standing in the shade, that dejected animal whose shoe was loose, still attached to the one-horse vehicle it had dragged from the station.

Mackeller, a sullen frown on his brow, said curtly—

“Good morning: I’m sorry to have troubled you on a day that is sacred to indolence.”

With that he walked to the victoria and stepped inside, sat down, and folded his arms, with grim determination across his breast. The edge of the situation, however, was somewhat dulled by the fact that the patient horse never lifted its head, and the driver, doubtless asleep somewhere, failed to appear. Stranleigh sauntered up alongside, a smile on his face.

“Peter,” he said, “you make me feel inhospitable, somehow, although reason whispers to me that such a charge is absurd, because if I have failed at all, it has been in pressing my hospitality too

urgently upon you. I confess defeat, and withdraw at once my too importunate invitation. You shall return to London on the 4.20, and meanwhile get down, not from your perch, but from this vehicle. We will adjourn to the shady pergola, and there, seated on a garden chair, you can discourse on business to your heart's content, as long as you don't object to my slumbering while you are doing so. Stranleigh Park is supposed to be a relaxing place; a climatic feature for which an iron man like you makes no allowance. You mustn't expect the alertness of Threadneedle Street when you are within sound of a waterfall, and not of a motor-bus."

"My lord," said Mackeller, formally, "I have had enough of genial persiflage."

"My dear Peter, if you compel a man, against his will, to gulp down the bitter powder of business, may he not be allowed a tablespoonful of persiflage to take away the taste? I have already acknowledged defeat, so, as you are strong, be merciful. Come along to the pergola, and there divulge your nefarious plans. I will help you if I can."

"You promise that?"

"I do if your needs can be satisfied with money. I do not if you require personal exertion from me

while this lovely weather lasts. I refuse to go to London on any account. I decline to do anything more strenuous than sign a cheque. Come along."

Stranleigh waved his difficult guest into a very comfortable wicker chair, and flung himself down on a similar seat opposite. A gentle breeze blew through the pergola, and the matted foliage of vines overhead kept out the rays of the midday sun. The waterfall's murmur came very faintly on the wings of an indolent wind.

Mackeller began in a tone that was almost combative.

"I must apologise for intruding upon your Garden of Eden——"

"In the guise of a business serpent," interrupted Stranleigh. "That's a rather fine piece of imagery, and I claim half the credit of it. Apology accepted. Fire ahead."

"My excuse is this. I understood from you that some experiments in philanthropy had not come off to your satisfaction."

"They failed utterly."

"So I thought, perhaps, you might be induced to extend your philanthropy to an acquaintance——"

"A friend, Peter, a friend. Don't be pessimistic."

“A friend, if you are good enough to put it in that light. I think I can guarantee that you will not be disappointed. You said a while ago I looked like a banker ; said it twice, in fact, so you may not be surprised to hear that I have lately promoted a financial company which is called the Surrey and Southern Counties Bank, Ltd.”

“Isn’t that title rather tautological, Peter ? Surely Surrey is itself a southern county ? ”

“Surrey does not touch the sea at any point. I call the counties southern that border the Channel, such as Kent, Sussex, Hampshire, and so on.”

“All right, my dear banker, you always could upset me on points of geography. I suppose that’s because you’ve travelled so much. Now, one more nasty objection. Aren’t there banks enough in England ? ”

“There are banks enough, of a kind. They are hide-bound institutions, steeped in tradition, and bound by red tape. For example, when formerly I was in a difficulty, from which you kindly extricated me, I offered Selwyn’s Bank ample security to cover the amount I wished to borrow. They refused to advance me a penny. The Surrey and Southern Counties Bank will deal more generously with its patrons.”

“ As how, for instance ? ”

“ The case of which I speak is an instance. I a man of my standing approached the Surrey Bank, offering as security valuable landed property, he could negotiate a loan with me. I have never forgiven Selwyn’s Bank for that rebuff.”

“ But I understood that your landed property was already mortgaged up to the hilt ? You were offering Selwyn’s Bank a secondary security.”

“ My estate was mortgaged, certainly, but it was worth three times the amount of that mortgage. Alexander Corbitt refused a loan simply through his personal dislike of me, but I’ll make him sit up before I’m done with him.”

“ Peter, you are surely not building a bank on the unstable foundation of revenge ? ”

“ Certainly not. Revenge comes by the way. There is in my possession a list of Selwyn’s clients. That bank is supported by country gentlemen, and they will be customers of mine before the year is out.”

Whether Mackeller would succeed in making Alexander Corbitt sit up or not, he certainly caused Stranleigh to discard his languid air, and assume as perpendicular a seated attitude as the wicker arm-chair would allow.

“ Do you call that fair competition, Mackeller ? ”

“ Why not ? ”

“ You intend to build the fortunes of your financial house on the ruins of Selwyn’s Bank ? ”

“ Not necessarily on its ruins. Indeed, if Corbitt wakes up in time, my competition may be to the advantage of Selwyn’s Bank, but he is such a conceited ass that he may not come to a realisation of the crisis until it is too late. His methods are antiquated. Nowadays a man must search for business and find it. The days have passed when the manager of a bank could sit in his room, and wait for the good things of life to fall into his lap.”

A shade of perplexity troubled the face of the younger man. He bent his head, and remained silent for a few moments, deep in thought. It was evident that with all his researches through the inner workings of Selwyn’s Bank, Mackeller had no suspicion it was really owned by Lord Stranleigh himself, who had heedlessly promised to aid an enterprise which now proved to be a raid upon his own property. Had any suggestion of this outcome occurred to him, he would have stopped Mackeller before he got so far in the unravelling of his plot. The young nobleman found himself in a quandary. Should he tell Mackeller at this stage

who was the real owner of Selwyn's Bank ? Mackeller evidently entertained a bitter enmity against Corbitt, and even if Stranleigh divulged the secret, his guest would very likely stipulate that Corbitt should be discharged, a condition to which Stranleigh could not agree. He resolved, therefore to keep his own counsel.

Next, would he be justified in warning Corbitt of the conspiracy against the institution over which he presided ? Such a course would come completely within the circle of modern business ethics, and indeed, the average man in the street would consider him a fool for not using the weapon thus placed into his hand. But could a gentleman use to his own advantage information that had come to him in confidence ? Stranleigh instantly decided that he could not. Corbitt must look out for himself. That was why he was so highly paid.

No thought of withdrawing his promise occurred to the young man. His word was pledged, and there an end. At last he looked up at his guest, who had been watching him narrowly, rather scowling as he did so.

“ Mackeller, I must confess I don't like this scheme. Will you reconsider your plan, and inaugurate your bank in the ordinary way ? ”

“ You make that proposal out of sympathy with Selywn ? ”

“ Yes ; I acknowledge a great liking and respect for Sir George Selwyn, even if he is old-fashioned, and Alexander Corbitt seems to me an upright, energetic man, whom I should be sorry to see come a cropper.”

“ Then let him look out for himself,” replied Mackeller with determination. “ Now, may I ask you a question or two ? Do I exceed my rights in founding a bank ? ”

“ Certainly not.”

“ Is it not a fact that every man with money possesses a bank account ? ”

“ I suppose that is true.”

“ Consequently, must not all the customers I procure for my bank be drawn from some similar institution ? ”

“ Doubtless that also is a fact.”

“ Then, as my bank must be recruited from the dissatisfied depositors of other banks, why should Selwyn’s alone be exempt ? ”

“ Why, indeed ? That question seems unanswerable. Am I to take it, then, that the advent of Mr. Peter Mackeller into the banking business is going to sow consternation among all existing organisations similar to his own ? ”

“Ah, now you’re sneering. I shall, of course, take my customers wherever I can find them.”

“Naturally. But you don’t quite catch my objection. Why should you make a dead set at Selwyn’s? Why not tackle someone your own size; the Bank of England, for choice?”

“We’ve got into the persiflage stage again, I’m sorry to notice. Excuse me if I bring the conversation down to a common-sense level. I have now explained to you my plans for establishing a new bank.”

“Yes; and I don’t like them.”

“You will soon recognise their success.”

“Probably, but I should not respect them any more on that account.”

“Are you hedging, Stranleigh?”

“No.”

“You’ll do what you promised?”

“Your question is superfluous, Peter. I shall not add what I think of it.”

“Will you lend me fifty thousand pounds on my note of hand?”

“Yes.”

“Will you deposit a hundred thousand pounds in my new bank?”

“Yes, if you insist on it.”

“I thank you, Stranleigh, most sincerely. You will find it one of the best deals you have ever made.”

“It is not a business deal, Peter: it is philanthropy. I told you I was making experiments in that line. Every capitalist in England would reject your proposal. However, I have a good reason for my action.”

“What is that?”

“It is because ‘Peter’ and ‘philanthropy’ begin with the same initial. So does ‘persiflage,’ now I come to think of it. Ah, there is the luncheon bell. Come into the house, and I will sign the two cheques; when those are in your pocket I hope you will enjoy a substantial meal, if you care for farmhouse fare. There is no Camperdown Club cuisine when you penetrate this far into the country.”

Summer faded into autumn, and autumn chilled into winter. The interval between July and January brought to Lord Stranleigh many new experiences, and added considerably to his list of friends. There was no doubt about it that the young man possessed the gift of ingratiating himself even with casual acquaintances. When, during the hot afternoon of that July day, Peter Mackeller

departed for London on the 4.20 train, he left behind him a host rather perturbed and dissatisfied in mind. Attempting to resume his *dolce far niente* attitude toward things in general, that host found his peace irretrievably shattered, for the time at least. His thoughts turned to banking ; a subject of which he knew practically nothing. He had been a philanthropist to the considerable sum of a hundred and fifty thousand pounds, yet he experienced none of that feeling of genial superiority which should be the reward of the generously disposed.

Despite the two munificent cheques he carried in his pocket, Mackeller went away as grumpy as he had arrived, showing no exaltation over success, nor even gratitude towards the beneficence that had saved his mission from failure, while Stranleigh himself grew more and more disturbed over the fact that he had placed financial dynamite in the hands of a ruthless man ; dynamite that could be used for the destruction of his friends. He cut short his vacation, and went up to London, determined to consult Sir George Selwyn, not upon recent events, but upon banking in general.

He found the old man in his summer home on the Kentish coast, enjoying the fresh breezes from the Channel, sitting in a comfortable easy chair

on his broad verandah, where he watched through a pair of powerful binoculars the great steamers making their way to and from America.

It was, perhaps, the sight of this shipping that suggested a journey to his lordship, and confirmed his decision to say nothing of the crisis to Sir George, who had aged pathetically since last he saw him. He thought it would be cruel to agitate the old gentleman who, after all, was rather helpless, but he bitterly censured himself for having given in so easily to the strenuous Mackeller.

The upshot of his visit was that he brought away with him several letters of introduction from Sir George, commending Edmund Trevelyan to the courtesies of bankers in Montreal, Toronto, and New York. Trevelyan had been the *nom de guerre* that Stranleigh used during his former visit to America. On this occasion he sailed on one of the Canadian turbine steamers direct to Montreal, where he met a surprise that caused him to wonder if he was still within the boundaries of the British Empire.

The Government official whom he encountered on landing was up to snuff. He was the man who had discovered that on several occasions emigrants assisted by their friends travelled first class, instead

of second or third, in order to escape the new restrictions which the Canadian Government had placed upon the pauper incomer. He was therefore not to be deceived by a spruce and rather flippant young man who had enjoyed cabin fare during the voyage.

“ Do you possess twenty-five dollars ? ” asked the official sternly of the richest man in England, who gave the name of Edmund Trevelyan.

“ I’ve got two dollars,” answered Stranleigh, “ or perhaps sixpence less since my last bottle of Bass.”

“ Are you a farm labourer ? ” was the next question.

“ I have occasionally worked upon a farm, but I never made any money at it.”

“ Did you earn the money that paid your passage ? ”

“ Well, now that you corner me, I can’t say that I did.”

“ Were you assisted by friends, or did you come over through the aid of any charity ? ”

“ Through the charity of old George Selwyn I received some help.”

“ Then you must go back.”

“ I intend to.”

“ If you have a return ticket, why didn’t you say so ? ”

“ Because I didn’t take a return ticket. I sail for England in a month or two *via* New York.”

“ Merely came this way to view the scenery ? ” suggested the officer.

“ Exactly ; still, I hope to get assistance when I land. I carry letters to people over here.”

“ You won’t land,” said the guardian of his country, with firmness. “ The Dominion expects every man to pay his own way, and we consider it servile for any one to accept out-door relief. You flash up twenty-five dollars, or else stay aboard this ship.”

“ I agree with you,” said Stranleigh, “ that that’s a very good spirit to work on.”

He dug down into his pockets, and fished up some Canadian silver, which he counted.

“ I find I have only a dollar and eighty cents. That last bottle of beer has wrecked me. What do you suggest ? ”

“ I don’t suggest. I order. It’s you for the raging main once more. I’ve caught several of your tribe already.”

“ Ah, I understand now why Lord Kitchener avoided Canada, and came home through the

United States. Horatio, Herbert Kitchener is a wise man, and there are *not* more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

The young man glanced to the rear.

"Ponderby," he said, quietly.

The deferential valet stepped forward.

"How much money have you?"

Ponderby had been trained to substitute "sir" for "my lord."

"I have about a thousand dollars in currency, sir, and the letter of credit for ten thousand."

"Bring hither the wherewithal, and crush this official. Perhaps we can both crawl into Canada under cover of our ill-gotten gains."

During his stay in the Dominion and the Republic, Edmund Trevelyan learned much about banking, and managed to enjoy an exceedingly good time as well.

When Stranleigh returned to his town house in London, he found a plethora of communications awaiting his attention, or rather, the attention of Blake, his secretary. Blake reported to him that, as the philosopher said, most of these letters and telegrams had answered themselves, being hopelessly out of date, but among the few that were

submitted to his lordship was one which he answered immediately. It was a request, now a week old, from Alexander Corbitt, asking for an interview as soon as possible after Stranleigh reached London. In response to the appointment Corbitt, with that politeness which is the attribute of kings and bankers, appeared exactly at the moment set.

“I’m very glad to see you home again,” he began. “Indeed, a fortnight ago I’d almost determined to sail for New York, but the situation being rather ominous, I was compelled to remain in London.”

“My dear Alexander; it was to escape such strenuous personalities as yours that I fled to America. I found the seclusion of Stranleigh Park was not enough to protect me from business worry, so I fled to the innocent peace and quiet of Chicago and New York, so restful to jaded nerves. You’ve been in a crisis, Corbitt?”

“I’ve been between the devil and the deep sea, with no Stranleigh to advise me.”

The younger man laughed.

“Your implied compliment is refreshing. I have always found my advice to be at a discount; at a bank discount, I might say, with financiers like yourself. My advice was to be shaken, but not

taken. As for your situation between the devil and the deep sea, that's easy. Avoid the deep sea, unless you're a good swimmer, but resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

Corbitt smiled grimly.

"That's exactly what I resolved to do," he said.

"Then you're not yet out of the dilemma?"

"No, the devil still goeth about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour, which seems to be Selwyn's Bank."

"Ah, the bank's in a bad way, is it?"

"No; it never was in a better position."

"Then what is there to growl about?"

"I'm not growling."

"Oh, excuse me; I thought you were. I see you've set out to bewilder me. I shall become puffed up by thinking you regretted my absence."

"No; I thank whatever gods there be that you were out of the country."

"This is brutal, Corbitt!"

"Your absence gave me a chance for once to have my own way, because I speedily overcame Sir George Selwyn's opposition. I feared an unexpected return on your part, for I thought it likely you would support him."

"Your surmise was quite correct."

“Then it was a blessing you were not here. You see, for years now Selwyn’s Bank has been in an unsatisfactory position, steadily growing worse. It became an old-fogey institution, falling more and more to the rear in the procession.”

“Curiously enough, Corbitt, I heard that same criticism made of our bank shortly before I left England.”

“Whoever made it, knew what he was talking about. Selwyn’s was the bank of the country gentlemen, presided over by Sir George, a country gentleman, for the benefit of country gentlemen. We lent money on landed property, which, as you know, cannot be turned quickly into cash if there is an urgent need for money. For years I have protested against this, wishing to do business with the City, rather than with the country, but Sir George, being very conservative, distrusting the Stock Exchange and all its works, would never give his consent to our catering for commercial business. He was always suspicious of stocks and shares, but sound securities that have a quotable value in the market are much better to deal with than mortgages on estates. I predicted disaster, and disaster came.”

“Disaster? In what way?”

"Why; we drifted into the hands of a soulless capitalist, namely, Earl Stranleigh of Wychwood."

"Ah, I see. I had forgotten."

"About the time you left for America there was floated a bank under the title of the 'Surrey and Southern Counties,' founded by a brainless fool named Mackeller, who knows as much about banking as does my foot."

"You underestimate yourself, Corbitt. Your capable foot must be rather efficient."

"It will be, when it wafts Peter Mackeller into oblivion."

"What has he done to you?"

"He has lured away most of our customers."

"Really? What did you do?"

"I made no effort to check his raid, but as speedily as possible replaced the dunderheads he took away by shrewd, alert business men, who have long wished to deal with Selwyn's Bank, because of its good name and respectability, and now, by the gods! we're making money."

"Ah, through the usual method of taking big risks?"

"Not so. I'm taking less risk to-day than ever I did. I know the intrinsic value of the chief securities in the market, so, by lending conservatively

and keeping an eye on the Stock Exchange, I can realise at once in case of a decline if sufficient margin is not instantly placed in my possession to protect the loan. I had much difficulty in getting Sir George to agree ; indeed, he was determined to cable for you, and I was equally determined he should not."

"How did you prevent him ? "

"I sent in my resignation, fortified by the fact that he didn't know exactly where you were, and he could not remember under what *nom-de-guerre* you travelled."

Stranleigh laughed.

"Clever Corbitt," he said, "and poor Sir George. Now I suppose you want me to go back again ? "

"No. I've been using my head so far, and now, as you suggested, the time for the foot has come."

"Not against me, I hope ? "

"Against Mr. Peter Mackeller. I made it my business to learn everything that could be learned regarding his bank. I was amazed to discover that his chief helper had been your lordship ; that you had actually placed on deposit with him the sum of a hundred thousand pounds. It is a question I don't care to ask, but I should like to know if

your lordship was aware that money would be used for the destruction of Selwyn's Bank."

"Being so recently from the States, I'll answer your question by asking another. Do you take me to be a fool?"

"Well," hesitated Corbitt, as he thoughtfully scratched his smooth-shaven, masterful chin. "I don't suppose you're so big a fool as that transaction would indicate."

"I see. I'm merely a sort of mitigated idiot. Thanks, Corbitt. Still, I don't like fulsome eulogy."

"Do you know how much interest Mackeller is promising to pay you?"

"I do not. Mackeller's an old friend of mine, and I made no bargain with him."

"He says he will pay three per cent."

"Isn't that all right?"

"It is if you think so. But he decoyed away our customers by offering them six-and-a-half per cent. ; a quite impossible figure. Say the bank-rate stands at what it does to-day, namely, four per cent. He lends out money at five per cent. How, then, can he pay his depositors six-and-a-half? His bank is on an unpractical basis, and must come a cropper."

"What do you wish me to do, Corbitt?"

"I want you to give me power of attorney to deal with that hundred thousand."

"Then at the psychological moment you will withdraw that deposit, and thus smash Mackeller's bank?"

"Precisely."

There was silence for a few minutes. Stranleigh paced up and down the room, deep in thought, while Corbitt scrutinised him keenly. At last Stranleigh stopped in his perambulation.

"Very well," he said. "Have a power of attorney made out, and I'll sign it."

"It is already made out," replied Corbitt, pulling the document from his inside pocket. "If your secretary is within call, or indeed, anyone else, your signature may be witnessed, and we can complete the transaction."

This was done, and Corbitt departed with the drastic instrument in his possession.

Two days later, at ten o'clock in the morning, just as Stranleigh was finishing his breakfast, Peter Mackeller was announced, and shown in. His host greeted him cordially, rather shocked to notice how careworn his old friend had become since last he saw him.

"Sit down, Peter, sit down, and try some of these peaches."

"I don't care for any, thank you. I came strictly on business."

"Never allow business to thrust aside the good things of life. Peaches are a luxury in January, and good to eat at any time in the year."

"Lord Stranleigh, you gave to Alexander Corbitt power of attorney over the money you deposited in my bank."

"Oh, that's no news. The transaction you mention happened two days ago."

"Perhaps it is news, my lord, that he gave me notice yesterday of his intention to transfer the hundred thousand to Selwyn's Bank."

"Yes, that is news; but surely the money amounts to more than a hundred thousand? Didn't you allow me any interest?"

"Interest? Of course."

"At what rate, Mackeller?"

"At three per cent."

"I understand that Selwyn's can allow me four, which I am told means a thousand pounds extra in a year on the sum I deposited, an increase of income which a hard-hearted commercial person like myself cannot afford to ignore. Being a shrewd business man you must commend my frugality.

Take care of the thousand pounds, and the millions will look after themselves."

" You are, of course, within your rights to exact the utmost interest you could obtain safely, but I think you should have permitted me the opportunity of meeting Corbitt's offer before giving notice of withdrawal."

" I think so too, Peter, but Corbitt is the man dealing with the affair, so if anything strenuous has been done, he is the person to blame, and to whom you should complain."

" Nevertheless, you gave him the power to act."

" Oh, I always made bad bargains. People seem delighted to take advantage of my innocence. Corbitt being, like yourself, an excellent man of business, will see that I get justice."

" Have you ever found me take advantage of you? Have you ever lost even a penny piece on my account?"

" I can't say that I have."

" Then why don't you play fair?"

Stranleigh raised his eyebrows slightly.

" That charge has never before been made against me."

" Well, it's made against you now."

" Ah, in that case, do sit down. I haven't quite

finished my breakfast yet, and I hate standing up so early in the morning without adequate sustenance. Don't you see I cannot with courtesy seat myself while you stand there like Rhadamanthus? After your proclaiming to my face my unfairness, the next thing my face looks for is a blow from your fist; therefore I should feel much safer if you sat down."

"Oh, curse this foolish, frivolous talk of yours! Sit down and finish your breakfast. You have my permission. Why don't you speak out like a man, and say you're determined to ruin me?"

"One reason is that I'm not determined on any such thing," said Stranleigh, stepping back a pace or two, but taking no advantage of the permission accorded him. "Would you have given me the extra one per cent. if I had asked for it?"

"Certainly I would."

"Could you have afforded to do so?"

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you do it? I gave you the money unconditionally and without any haggling. To quote yourself, why didn't you play fair?"

"Three per cent. is a fair bank interest."

"Do any of your depositors get six-and-a-half?" An added pallor spread over Mackeller's anxious

face. He staggered back as if he had received the blow which Stranleigh professed to fear, and now, without invitation, he sank into the nearest chair.

Stranleigh seated himself more nonchalantly, and selecting a ripe peach, picked up a silver knife.

“Sure you won’t have a peach? Some grapes, then?”

Mackeller made no reply.

“You see, I hope, how easily I might charge you with unfairness, but, of course, there’s nothing unfair about the transaction. I told you, when I gave you the money, that it was philanthropy, and not business, so there could be no unfairness if you never paid me a penny for it.”

“Then why, without warning to me, do you suddenly transform philanthropy into business?”

“Don’t you see why? In the first place, I wished to bring you here, which I’ve done. In the second place, I desire you shall make friends with Alexander Corbitt.”

Mackeller sprang to his feet, and a red flush of anger chased the pallor from his countenance.

“Before asking a favour of Alexander Corbitt, I’ll see him damned, and cast into the lowest and hottest corner of——”

Stranleigh raised his hand,

“ Tut, tut ! ” he cried. “ Such an example of hatred, and such language before an innocent youth like myself, are not permissible. Sit down again, and if you don’t behave yourself, I’ll cause the stalwart Ponderby to tie you to your chair. You’d look rather ridiculous springing up in your disturbing fashion with a chair attached to you.”

“ I’ll have nothing to do with that man Corbitt ! ” shouted Mackeller, his fists clenched.

“ Yes ; I gathered that from your previous profane remark, and we will take your determination as fixed. Therefore, sit down quietly, and enlighten me as to what you expect from your fellow-men. You make a quite unprovoked attack on Corbitt and his bank. You jeopardise his own position, because if he cannot successfully combat you, he must go under. Now, for the first time, Corbitt, with a club in his hands, is prepared to smash you. What else can you anticipate ? You asked for a fight, and you’ve got it. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I shall send for Corbitt, and should he be imbued with your uncompromising spirit, I shall then stand aside and let the best man win.”

Stranleigh touched the bell, and when Ponderby appeared, asked—

“ Is the motor-car at the door ? ”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Then just put on your hat, Ponderby. Ride down to Selwyn’s Bank as fast as the police will allow, and bring Corbitt back with you. If he pleads press of business or any other motive for delay, don’t argue with him, but take him under your arm to the car, and tell the chauffeur to get back here as quick as he can.”

“Yes, my lord,” replied the faithful Ponderby, without even the faintest suggestion of a smile.

Mackeller rose.

“I am sorry I troubled you, Lord Stranleigh,” he said.

“Won’t you wait until Corbitt comes?”

“No.”

“It is essentially a case for compromise,” said Stranleigh very quietly.

“There can be no compromise between Alexander Corbitt and me.”

“Very well, Mr. Mackeller, I am sorry to bid you good-morning.”

He struck again the little silver bell, and Ponderby entered, with his hat in hand.

“Ponderby, I find I shall not need Mr. Corbitt after all. The next time Mr. Mackeller comes to this house, I am not at home.”

“Very good, my lord.”

Mackeller stood there hesitating. Ponderby apparently didn’t know he was in the room. Stranleigh, with some care, selected another peach. Mackeller, clearing his throat several times, said huskily—

“I will wait for Corbitt if that is your wish.”

“Bring Mr. Alexander Corbitt here, Ponderby.”

“Very good, my lord,” reiterated Ponderby, fading from the room.

“May I suggest a peach?” proffered Stranleigh, with the accents and tones of a seraph.

“Thank you,” replied Mackeller, reaching forward and helping himself.

“They are really excellent for this time of the year,” commented his lordship genially.

Nothing more was said until the door opened, and—

“Mr. Alexander Corbitt,” announced the footman.

The bank manager stepped inside, then paused abruptly as he saw Mackeller, while a frown ruffled his brow.

“You sent for me?” he said.

“Yes, Corbitt. I am ever so much obliged for your promptness.”

“That is due, my lord, to the recklessness of your

chauffeur. Your number must have been taken half-a-dozen times since we left the bank."

"Oh, that's all right! I think you and Mr. Mackeller are acquainted?"

"I have met him." Corbitt's strong jaws snapped like a steel trap.

"I have brought you together to suggest a compromise."

"To speak quite frankly, my lord——"

"Sit down, Alexander, and drop the 'my lord'; then speak as frankly as you like."

"I expected this gentleman would make an appeal to you," continued Corbitt. "That is why I asked that my option should run for a month. Even you cannot interfere with it until twenty-eight days are past. A writ has already been issued. The Surrey and Southern Counties Bank is insolvent."

"You are, then, determined to smash it?" enquired Stranleigh.

"Quite."

"Help yourself to a peach, Corbitt. They are really first-rate."

Corbitt took one. Mackeller had risen once more, in spite of his lordship's look of protest.

"Lord Stranleigh, I beg you to do me the justice of acknowledging that I made no appeal to you."

“ Quite right, Peter, you didn’t. Sit down, please, How the deuce can we carry on a sober business conference if you insist on acting jack-in-the-box ? I am the one forced to make appeals, and I appeal to you now, Alexander, as I have already appealed to Peter here, for a settlement between you two.”

“ I cherish no rancour in this matter, Stranleigh,” said Corbitt, “ and furthermore, am under no illusion regarding my own position. I quite realise that you can dismiss me at any moment, but while I am manager at Selwyn’s Bank I shall act entirely in the interests of Selwyn’s Bank.”

“ Good man,” murmured Stranleigh gently. “ This is but another phase, Alexander, of your threat to resign, that terrified our mutual friend, Sir George Selwyn, into granting your request. Now, Sir George is a notable business man, and doubtless his surrender to you was wise. I am not a business man, and, wise or unwise, I’m not going to surrender. Now, I wish to ask you a question. and if you do not answer it in the affirmative, I shall be anxious to learn what is the reason of your reply. My question is this: Have I a right to dispose of my own property as best pleases me ? Now, do not answer rashly, because if you answer in the negative I had no right to give you that power of attorney.”

“ I answer in the affirmative, of course, and without hesitation.”

“ Now, Peter, I put the same question to you, and I caution you as I did Corbitt, for if you also do not answer in the affirmative I had no right to give you that hundred and fifty thousand pounds last July.”

“ I say yes,” replied Peter promptly.

“ Let us thank the gods of peace that we have discovered one small platform on which you two men can stand together. Now I want a little more information about your bank, Peter. Do you own the majority of its stock ? ”

“ No.”

“ Who does ? ”

“ No one person. It has been taken up by various capitalists in the City.”

“ They must have felt a rather supreme confidence in your business qualities.”

“ I suppose so.”

“ Did you never set afoot any enquiries regarding the ownership of your bank ? ”

“ I didn’t need to. I got the cash, and that was the main thing.”

“ H-m ! Perhaps. Still, if you’d troubled yourself to trace those sales of stock, the tracing would

have led you to my door in every instance. I am the owner of the Surrey and Southern Counties Bank, Mr. Mackeller. Corbitt, tell your competitor who owns Selwyn's Bank."

"Selwyn's Bank is owned by Earl Stranleigh of Wychwood."

"Now, gentlemen, don't you see how easy the solution is? We will amalgamate these two banks, and call the result, say, Selwyn's and Southern Counties. Selwyn's has a splendid array of customers engaged in business. The Southern Counties has a conservative body of patrons from the landed aristocracy. The amalgamated company will boast of both respectability and energy. Now, Alexander Corbitt, I offer you the choice of being president of the new combination, or its business manager. Sir George Selwyn has written to me that he wishes to retire."

"I would rather be business manager," said Corbitt promptly, "so long as I am not interfered with too much by my nominal superior."

"You shall be untrammelled. I guarantee that."

"Then I suppose you take the presidency yourself, Stranleigh?"

"No. I offer that to Mr. Peter Mackeller."

Peter's head sunk into his hands.

"You see, Peter," continued Stranleigh, taking no notice of Mackeller's evident emotion, "things have got in rather a tangle with the Surrey and Southern Counties. You can't pay six-and-a-half to depositors. You're losing money every day, and the course is so shaped that the more customers you get the greater is your loss. Now, you and I will place the straightening out of that on the broad shoulders of this callous man, Corbitt. We shall have nothing to do but play. Meanwhile, to the business world, you score a great triumph, for it will appear that your new and energetic bank has swallowed the old-fogey concern, otherwise you never would be nominated president. Do you accept, Peter?"

"Yes, and thank you, Stranleigh," came from between Peter's hands.

"Now, gentlemen, see how easy it is so long as you act on the principle of never shoving a man against the wall, even if you have the power."

Corbitt laughed.

"Don't be a humbug, Stranleigh," he said. "You've shoved us both against the wall."

Stranleigh laughed in turn.

"We all pose a bit, but one thing there's no humbug about. It is evident that three of these delicious peaches are left in the dish. Let's have one each."

CHAPTER X.

THE ROMANCE OF THE GOLDEN BRICK.

“At last, at long last!” cried Mr. Blake, Lord Stranleigh’s exuberant secretary, as he waved aloft a letter he had just taken out of its envelope.

“See where she stands
And waves her hands
Upon the quay.
Yo-ho, yo-ho, yo-oh-ho!”

Blake sang these lines in a deep bass voice, and Stranleigh looked up from his newspaper with the slightest possible trace of annoyance on his brow.

“I knew it would come, for it was written. It was bound to come.”

“What was bound to come?” demanded Stranleigh. “If you refer to your own dementia, it hasn’t *come*. It was here long ago.”

“It is a cloud no bigger than a lady’s hand—most suitable phrase that, ‘a lady’s hand’—but

soon to increase until it becomes a suitable enclosure for a strong man's arm, looming above the horizon as the inevitable She, and Stranleigh's pose of indifference to women, in which, if he only knew it, he is a mere plagiarist of my Lord Kitchener, will dissolve."

"Oh, your brain is dissolving. What *are* you howling about?"

"Your High Mightiness is formally addressed in these presents by His Excellency the Austrian Ambassador. It seems that the Baroness von Arrenfels, only daughter and heiress of the late Baron von Arrenfels, is now in England on account of her health. She is something of an invalid. She desires an interview with Lord Stranleigh of Wychwood, in order to speak upon financial matters. The numerous estates in Austria which belonged to her father are now hers, and apparently she wishes the advice of one who has managed so well his own extensive properties in England and elsewhere. She probably imagines you a dried-up old financial duffer who will temporarily take the place of her aged parents, now no more. Wait a moment, and I will learn further particulars."

They were in the library, and Blake took down from the shelves a thick red volume. Turning

its pages until he reached the place he was in search of, he murmured aloud some information. The Baroness was twenty-four years old ; one of her estates lay in the vicinity of Vienna. The summer baronial hall of the family was built in the sixteenth century in picturesque Tyrol, and was entitled Schloss Arrenfels. Large acreage of wild lands in Transylvania. The Arrenfels Palace in Vienna was a modern building.

“ There you are, Lord Stranleigh. What answer is the lady to receive through her Ambassador ? ”

“ Hand me the Ambassador’s letter, please.”

The young man scanned it.

“ There seems to me something strange about this method of introduction,” he mused.

“ Not at all ! ” cried Blake. “ The Austrians are a very etiquette-loving people—stiffest and most formal Court in Europe, I should say—therefore the lady does the proper and ponderous thing. She sets her Government in motion, and proceeds under its auspices, thus eliminating all letters of introduction, and rendering unnecessary any further credentials.”

“ Yes, yes ; that is true enough, yet somehow instinctively, I feel a certain distrust of this proposal.”

"Oh, that's merely because a woman makes it."

"Why should she wish to consult with me upon finance? It is one of the many subjects I know nothing about."

"True, alas! for the vagaries of Fame, because it is the one thing the world gives you credit for. Lord knows you're not brilliant, but everyone knows you are rich."

"This letter, coming from the Austrian Ambassador, must be answered as punctiliously as it is written. Kindly indite such an epistle, and deliver it in person. Before you hand it over, however, see the Secretary of the Embassy, and find out whether he knows anything about the lady."

"Oh, the over-cautiousness of the rich! If an angel from heaven were to appear, they would not believe; want to see her passport, and all that sort of thing. It seems to me as a man of the world that all you need verify is the genuineness of the Ambassador's communication."

Blake paused, but Stranleigh made no reply, then with a sigh the secretary continued:—

"Still, I shall do exactly what you say."

"Thanks," murmured Stranleigh. "That would be novel, but gratifying."

Blake's investigation proved eminently satis-



“She entered his drawing-room accompanied by an aged but very aristocratic Englishwoman.”

Lord Stranleigh, Philanthropist

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factory. The lady's social status was beyond question, and her wealth estimated in large figures. The oddness of her application was mitigated by the fact that she distrusted her father's legal advisers, and had sought counsel of the Austrian Ambassador, who, years before, had been her father's friend. The Ambassador himself was not a rich man, and he felt that any advice he might give on a subject other than international politics would be valueless. It was his suggestion, therefore, and not the lady's, that brought Lord Stranleigh into consideration. So Blake duly delivered the letter making an appointment, and Stranleigh admitted that his doubts had vanished.

The young nobleman was alone when the Baroness von Arrenfels was announced. She entered his drawing-room accompanied by an aged but very aristocratic Englishwoman, who had probably seen better days, and was now acting as her ladyship's duenna. The girl was tall, and possessed a superb figure; even Stranleigh admitted to himself that she was more than ordinarily beautiful, distinguished by that patrician bearing which seems to be the birthright of the Viennese woman. The Baroness spoke English with a delicate, chaste perfection that was admirable, qualified by a slight

touch of foreignness that seemed an ornament rather than a defect.

“I must apologise, my lord earl, for this quite unwarrantable intrusion upon you. I come, however, at the suggestion of my father’s friend, the Austrian Ambassador to England.”

“So I understood, madam, but I beg to assure you that you are equally welcome on your own account. I hope that I may be of service to you, and thus in some slight measure make a return for the delightful hospitality I have myself received from citizens of your charming country.”

The Baroness bowed, and coloured with obvious pleasure at these words.

“I am deeply grateful to you, my lord, for what you have just said, and in order to begin at once upon my mission, I may perhaps remove a misapprehension from your mind. If you have been told anything about me, I daresay you have heard I am very rich. That is not true. I am in reality poor, and this poverty is the cause of my visit to England, although I left Vienna ostensibly for the benefit of my health.”

“I am sorry to hear that you are poor, but very glad to observe that your health seems in no need of improvement.”

The lady smiled.

“ Although actual money is scarce with me, I am nevertheless in occupation of very extensive estates, which would furnish an ample income, were they not encumbered by mortgages, whose interest absorbs nearly all that the land produces. My father was a very noble-hearted, generous man, most open-handed and unsuspecting. In addition to this, he held an aristocratic contempt for business of all kinds, which disposition, I believe, was grossly taken advantage of by men of affairs in Vienna, whom he trusted. The result is that, although he died happy in the thought that he left me amply provided for, such was not in fact the case. If I am to live in Austria and keep up anything like the state to which my family has been accustomed during the past, some radical change must be made in the management of my property. That is another reason why I am living quietly here in England.”

“ But would not the revenue from your estates ultimately clear off the mortgages ? ”

The girl laughed very winningly.

“ You have used exactly the right word, my lord. ‘ Ultimately,’ yes ; but do I seem to you a person who could wait patiently for ‘ ultimately ’ ? Is it strange to you that I wish to enjoy my life *now* ? ”

“ Not strange at all. Perfectly natural ! ” cried Stranleigh, looking at her with undisguised admiration.

“ My father being a most indifferent business man, it was likely that I should be a very inferior business woman. Nevertheless, with great patience, I have perused a mass of documents pertaining to my estates.” Here, at a signal, the silent attendant opened a small handbag she carried, and drew from it a number of legal documents, which she placed on the table before the Baroness. The lady glanced up at Stranleigh with a smile.

“ I have been told,” she said, “ that you discovered one of the richest gold mines in the world.”

The young man almost blushed, and answered in some confusion.

“ I fear that rumour gives us both credit for what we do not possess. I did not discover the mine, but —I made use of it. It contained merely surface gold, very soon exhausted, which was perhaps all to the good, for it was situated in a most unhealthy part of Africa. Yes ; I got some gold from it—a ship-load or two.”

“ Perhaps you are aware that Austria, so far as its minerals are concerned, takes first rank among the countries of Europe. Three million hundred-

weight of gold and silver ore are mined annually, most of which is obtained in Transylvania, and in Transylvania one of my father's estates is situated. I find that shortly before his death he had commissioned mining engineers to test its gold-bearing qualities, and their reports, which I brought with me, are most encouraging. I have reason to suspect that the financiers with whom he was in touch in Vienna are aware of the richness of this estate, for they have endeavoured to buy it since my father's death. I doubt if he himself realised its possibilities, for the land is on the very eastern boundary of Austria, a portion of the country he never visited, so far as I know. I may be oversuspicious, but I believe that if I made any attempt to develop the mineral resources of this district, by endeavouring to get capital in Vienna, these financiers would foreclose, or in some manner dispossess me of the land which they represent as worthless, and I daresay it is barren enough for any other purpose than mine.

" My hope, then, is that you will send to this property English engineers, who are silent and can be trusted, and that if their reports warrant you in proceeding further, I may enlist your aid in forming a mining company that will pay me whatever value

your English engineers estimate it is worth. With this money I can then clear my other estates of all encumbrances, and receive from them an income sufficient for my needs."

"Company-forming," said Stranleigh, after a moment's pause, "is a business I have had very little to do with. The reputation of a confirmed company-former in this country is considered somewhat shady. I must admit that your proposition seems very attractive, but before anything could be done towards submitting it to the public, honest and competent mining engineers must be sent there to investigate."

"That is exactly what I suggested," sweetly murmured the lady.

"Precisely. Well, mining engineers are a most estimable body of men; nevertheless, it has been known that occasionally their reports were not justified by subsequent working. A great deal of money has been lost in this country in mining operations. I have never willingly allowed my name to appear upon a company's prospectus, yet in this case I would make an exception to my rule, provided the reports of those sent out to Transylvania warranted the forming of a company. There's only one engineer in whose knowledge

and honesty I have complete confidence, and he happens to be in Brazil at the present moment. Are you in a hurry about this company-forming, Baroness?"

"Why, of course, I should like to get the money as soon as possible, so that I may return to Vienna. If all you fear is that those who subscribe to the company will lose their money, I can quite readily make their position sure by placing all my other estates at your disposal as a guarantee against loss."

Stranleigh thought this offer showed she was not much of a business woman after all, for if her estates were already mortgaged up to the hilt, they would form but indifferent security. However, her proposal appeared to him an evidence of good faith.

"There is no necessity of doing that," he said. "It would merely complicate matters. I'd rather go into this plan on its own merits. There need not be much delay. I'll send a couple of engineers over at my own risk. If their report on the property is favourable, well and good; there will be no difficulty in finding the money. If unfavourable, then it would be undesirable to go further into the matter."

"Ah, but if unfavourable, how could I then

repay you the money expended ? ” she asked with troubled brow.

“ Oh, that would not matter in the least,” said Stranleigh. “ The cost will not be great ; merely the time of a pair of engineers for, say, two weeks. I often examine different properties, and now and then secure something very good, which a thousand times makes up for the loss caused by those investigations which are failures. No ; there will be nothing at all to pay if the researches of these men prove fruitless, though I hope for your sake the reverse will be the case.”

“ You are very good, Lord Stranleigh, but I fear you make light of what should be a real obligation on my part. Still, I take you at your word. Here are the title deeds of the Transylvania estate, which I will leave in your care until such time as they can be transferred to the company, and here are the reports of the engineers from Vienna. Do you read German ? ”

“ Oh, yes.”

“ In that case I shall not offer to have translations made.” The Baroness rose.

“ If you wait a moment, I will give you a receipt for these documents.”

The lady laughed in very musical cadence.

“ I need no receipt, Lord Stranleigh. They are

quite safe in your care ; safer, indeed, than in mine," and again thanking him, she departed.

Lord Stranleigh sat there very quietly, deep in reverie, and it was not of the gold mine he was thinking. His house seemed, somehow, to become empty, lonesome, deserted. He wished she had stayed longer, and now chided himself for lack of presence of mind. He should have raised objections, or asked further explanations. He might have brought down a map, inducing her to point out the exact location of her estate : a hundred methods now suggested themselves to him by which a departure could have been postponed.

How exquisitely charming she was ! Although dealing with dry finance and company-forming, these details, usually so disliked by him, had taken on a certain romantic atmosphere caused by the sweet music of her voice. Then he remembered she had not left him any address, and next moment surmised, quite correctly, that she could be communicated with through the Austrian Embassy. Stranleigh admitted to himself that at last his fancy had become entangled with a woman. His thoughts turned towards friends who had married foreigners, and in every case he could remember, these international unions had been most successful.

Among these visions passing before the eyes of his mind, there naturally occurred the form of Peter Mackeller, who had wedded a rich American lady. Their marriage had turned out supremely happy, despite the fact that Peter developed into a rather cross-grained, grumpy sort of person; at least, so far as his relations with Stranleigh were concerned. The American girl married Mackeller when he was a mining engineer, not very well off, but Peter had become an important man since that day; a person to be reckoned with in the financial circles of London. Sometimes Stranleigh had favoured him, and sometimes luck had favoured him, so that now he was undoubtedly rich.

The acquisition of money had not sweetened his temper: he was imperious, and inclined to be unreasonable, yet as Stranleigh thought about him, he knew that here was the engineer to visit Austria if he could be induced to go. Whatever might be held against Mackeller, his rigid honesty was beyond question. Should there be gold in that land, Peter would discover it, and if there was not, no bribe could prevent him from telling the truth. There was, however, the difficulty that Peter, now wealthy, would resent being asked to take once more to mining engineering, and might thus refuse with scorn.

Stranleigh pondered a few minutes, wondering, if he brought about a meeting between Peter and the Baroness, whether the charm and magnetism of the gentlewoman would exercise the same influence on the stern Mackeller that had so effectually led to his own capture, but he dismissed this as unlikely, although it might be tried as a last resort.

The Baroness had complained of the dishonesty she suspected in her Viennese advisers, so Stranleigh believed that nothing would advance her own interests better than enlisting on her behalf the assistance of a man so blunt and incorruptible as Mr. Peter Mackeller.

"Ah well," he cried with a sigh, "at worst Peter can only refuse. I'll ring him up and get yes or no, and cast the subject from my mind."

His lordship had been thinking of luck favouring Peter, but he was now to profit by an instance of the fickle goddess putting in good work for himself, assisted by the defective nature of the telephone, and the peculiar construction of the English language. He unhooked, and placed against his ear, the receiver of the telephone which stood on the table beside him.

"Give me seven-nought-double-nine City . . . Ah ! is that Mr. Mackeller's office ? Is Mr. Mackeller in ? . . . Very good. Would you ask him

to come to the 'phone? . . . What? . . . The Earl of Stranleigh—Lord Stranleigh—S-t-r-a-n-l-e-i-g-h . . . thank you. I'll hold the line."

Now there will be given what Stranleigh knew he said, and supposed that Mackeller heard, and later will be shown the mistake that arose.

"That you, Peter? How are you?"

"Oh, first-rate. What can I do for you?"

"I suppose you're pretty busy just now?"

"Yes, and shall be for the next month to come."

"Well, then, now's a good time to desert duty and join me. You always prospered, Peter, when you linked your fortunes with mine."

"What do you want?"

"I have become interested in a mining property. I want you to go right away and examine it."

"Oh, hang it all, I've given up that sort of thing long ago! London is full of excellent mining engineers."

"True; but they are not Peter Mackellers," and then Stranleigh added under his breath, "Thank the Lord!" but that injudicious ejaculation did not go over the wires.

"I'm sorry it is impossible, Stranleigh."

"Nothing is impossible, Peter, when a man has made up his mind. I always did manage your business better than you could yourself, though you

never had the decency to admit it. Now, I'll look after it while you're away. In these days of speedy communications, the journey won't take you long. This project is an undeveloped gold mine in Transylvania. It promises the richness of Midas, and I want to know the truth. You can then come in with me on the ground floor, if you think it worth while."

"I thought there weren't any undeveloped gold-mines in that region. It's been, if anything, over-prospected, and I'm nearly certain all lands worth having have been taken up long ago."

"Is that so? I, of course, know nothing of the district. Still, I'll accept all the risk if you'll go."

"I can't promise at the moment, Stranleigh, but by a curious coincidence, my wife spoke only this morning about going there. If you'll wait half an hour, I will get into communication with her, and should she prove to be of the same mind, I'll take it on."

"Thanks, Mackeller; that's first-rate."

"How long shall you be in?"

"If you promise to call, I'll wait here till you come."

"I'll call and get particulars if I determine to go across; otherwise I will telephone you. Good-bye."

Stranleigh hung up the receiver.

“Now, what vagary,” said the young man to himself, “has struck the beautiful Mrs. Mackeller, that she should wish to go into the wilds of Transylvania, practically alongside Roumania? Ah, I see; Vienna is the attraction. She will take up residence there while Peter investigates the mining property.”

When Peter arrived at Stranleigh House, and learned that for “gold mine” he had understood “coal mine,” and for “Transylvania” “Pennsylvania,” he gave an excellent rendition of a man in a rage, storming up and down the room, alternating maledictions upon that useful modern invention, the telephone, with denunciations of Stranleigh’s defective articulation. His lordship smiled appreciatively at the outbreak, but at last calmed Peter, and wrung from him a reluctant consent.

To Transylvania, therefore, Peter Mackeller went, and reported that the estate was the most promising gold property he had ever examined. Stranleigh put the forming of the company into the hands of his City business men, with a result that his lordship’s name on the prospectus caused the capital to be subscribed about ten times over. There was paid to the Baroness one hundred thousand pounds in cash, after she had signed the necessary

documents, which conveyed the Transylvanian property to the English company.

This final stage of the business was accomplished at the Austrian Embassy, under the auspices of that clever secretary, Lieutenant Grunwald, a nephew of Count Hammerstein, the Ambassador. Disgruntled Peter refused to join the company in any capacity, and so Stranleigh's wish that he should manage the mining fell through. He then determined to wait for a month until his efficient young man from Brazil, for whom he cabled, could get across, and this delay turned out, in the circumstances, to be a blessing in disguise.

One morning Stranleigh opened his newspaper and read with dismay the following item:—

“DEATH OF THE BARONESS VON ARRENFELS.”

“We deeply regret to state that last night, at Brighton, there died Baroness von Arrenfels, only daughter of the late Baron von Arrenfels, of Vienna and Tyrol. About six months ago she was ordered by her physicians to Brighton, in the hope that the bracing air of that resort might cure an anæmic disorder that had kept her bedridden for more than a year. To the regret of her many friends, this hope has proved fallacious. The Baroness,

who was only twenty-four years of age, leaves many estates and great wealth, which now pass to a distant relative, General Goetz, of the Emperor's Staff in Vienna."

Stranleigh put the newspaper in his pocket, asked Blake to bring him all the letters and documents pertaining to the Baroness, drove to the Austrian Embassy, and sent in his card to the Ambassador. He found the Count very much perturbed about the death of the young lady.

"I cannot imagine," he said, "why she had been here for six months without ever communicating with me, for her father was one of my oldest friends."

He was still more astonished when Stranleigh showed him letters purporting to be his own, relating to the Baroness.

"These," he said, "were written by my secretary, Lieutenant Grunwald. I knew nothing of them."

"Could I see your secretary?" asked Stranleigh.

A shade of annoyance passed over the Ambassador's face.

"I regret to say that you cannot. The lieutenant is a nephew of mine, and I have been very patient with him, giving him every opportunity for advancement, but a short time since he left me, and has

gone to Paris, where he has many friends. His only explanation was that a legacy of a hundred thousand pounds had come to him, and he was tired of office routine. The new secretary finds his affairs in a state of great confusion, and we are now engaged in disentangling them."

"A hundred thousand pounds!" echoed Stranleigh, his brows contracting.

"Yes. The lieutenant, I am sorry to say, is rather wild, and a confirmed gambler. I'm afraid the money won't last him long in Paris. Still," concluded the Ambassador with a sigh, "Gustav is not too scrupulous, and generally wins more than he loses."

"We will say no more of him for the present," remarked Stranleigh, "but there is one other piece of information I should like to obtain. Was there in attendance on the Baroness, since she came to England, a tall, elegantly formed, and very beautiful young woman, who speaks English to perfection?"

Count Hammerstein gazed searchingly at the young man, an expression of trouble on his face. After a long pause the Ambassador said:

"Why do you ask that question?"

"There is such a person, then? I'll tell you why I ask the question when I have received such particulars about her as you may be willing to give."

" You refer undoubtedly to Fraulein Seidel. She is the daughter of a peasant, and I sometimes think possesses the cunning and cupidity of a peasant, although she was taken up when only five or six years old by the mother of the late Baroness, as a companion for her daughter. She was educated with that daughter, and treated throughout like one of the family. During the last years of the Baron's life she developed a very acute business talent, and devoted much of her time to helping him in a secretarial capacity. The last time I saw the Baron in relation to his affairs, it was quite evident to me that she knew more about them than he did ; a dangerously clever person, I should say."

" Was Miss Seidel acquainted with your nephew, the secretary ? "

Again the Count looked worried.

" I should like to know your reason for that enquiry," he said.

" Because it was assuredly Miss Seidel who called upon me in the guise of the Baroness, and I received her, after questioning your secretary regarding the genuineness of your letter of introduction. I received every assurance from this Embassy that the lady was what she purported to be. As a consequence I purchased a Transylvania

estate alleged to be hers, and here are the papers she signed at this Embassy. I paid the very considerable sum of one hundred thousand pounds which, by an odd coincidence, is the amount bequeathed to your nephew."

"Oh, good God ! good God !" cried the Ambassador, rising and clasping his hands over his brow as he walked up and down the room. "This is terrible ! As bad as cheating at cards. But what you say explains everything."

"Explains what, my lord Count ?"

"The letters my wretched nephew left behind him in his carelessness. Letters from this woman, recently written, indicating that he had promised to marry her, and asking fulfilment of his word. After all I have done for him ! This means my disgrace and ruin."

Stranleigh's deep sympathy with the honest old man in his distress was evident.

"Not so, my lord Count. May I beg you to sit down again ? We must avoid publicity, and then I ask you to leave the disentanglement to me. Do you happen to know General Goetz, heir to the Arrenfels estate ? "

"I know him very well indeed. He is a valued friend of mine."

"A good man? One who would not take advantage of a fellow creature in a crisis?"

"One of the best; a Viennese gentleman. I can give him no higher praise."

"Then, with your own hand write me a letter of introduction to him. I leave for Vienna to-night."

When this letter was presented Stranleigh rose, thanked the Count not only for the epistle, but for the reception accorded him, and the explanation so freely given. One would think, to listen to the young man, that the Ambassador had conferred on him a great obligation, instead of being the primary cause of a serious loss.

"I think," said his lordship, "that I understand the situation, and can deal with it, avoiding publicity of any sort. There is just one crucial point in any question, and in this case it is the securing legal possession of the property the company supposed itself buying. With such a man as you describe General Goetz to be, I am unlikely to meet any difficulty, therefore I hope you will not allow my visit to disturb you further."

The old man's emotions did not allow him to speak, but he wrung the hand of his visitor with thankfulness.

Lord Stranleigh took the nine o'clock train that

evening from Charing Cross to Dover. The train was but sparsely occupied, and in passing along it to find an empty compartment, he caught sight of a lady dressed in deep mourning, whom he instantly recognised, in spite of the fact that she was heavily veiled. After a moment's hesitation (there was little time to make up his mind, for the guard was already waving his green flag) he opened the door and stepped in:

“I hope you will pardon my intrusion, Miss Seidel, but I think, perhaps, you will admit that you owe me a word or two of explanation.”

“I owe you much more than that, my lord, but I possess nothing with which to repay you.”

“The conversation which you permit will do that. I merely wish to know if my surmises are correct. I may be doing an injustice in my thoughts to a person whom I will not name.”

“You mean me? Whatever your thoughts are, I well deserve them.”

“No; I did not mean you.”

“You cannot think too badly of me. I have lied, I have cheated, I have forged, I have stolen. There is little that is wicked left for me to do. My punishment may be inadequate, but it is grievous enough. I am deserted, I am penniless, I am out of employment.”

“Oh, these things can be remedied. Now, let's

get over the disagreeable part of this at once. Did you give the money to Lieutenant Grunwald ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ All of it ? ”

“ Every penny.”

“ And he deserted you, after promising marriage ? ”

“ Yes ; and wrote me a brutal letter.”

“ I take it that he originated the plan for obtaining the money ? ”

“ Yes ; and arranged it so that I alone must bear the brunt. He can prove that he merely borrowed it from me, not knowing its source.”

“ He *is* a thorough-paced scoundrel ! ”

“ I am now on my way to Vienna to give myself up to the police and make confession.”

“ You will do nothing of the sort.”

“ Why not ? ”

“ Because I forbid it. Furthermore, to show that you are not bereft of friends, I shall proceed direct from Vienna to Paris, seek out this man, challenge him, fight him, and kill him, if I can.”

“ Oh, no, no, no, no ! ” cried the girl, for the first time some animation coming into her voice.

“ Why not ? ”

“ Because—because I love him.”

“ You can’t possibly love him now ! ” exclaimed Stranleigh, with indignation.

The girl made no answer, but began to cry.

"Do you mean to say you would marry Lieutenant Grunwald if he asked you?"

"Yes," she murmured. "When a woman is really in love, all pride forsakes her."

Stranleigh sat back in his corner, too angry and disgusted to carry on further conversation. Another instance, he said to himself, proving that he did not comprehend women, and he quoted inaudibly the lines—

“‘ You smiled and spoke and I believed,
By every word and smile deceived.
Yet let not this last wish be vain,
Deceive, deceive me once again.’”

"Are you now on your way to Paris?" she asked timidly.

"No; to Vienna. I must see General Goetz at once. The Ambassador gave me a letter."

"Ah, I understand," she whispered. Again, after a long silence, she spoke: "You go from Vienna to Paris?"

"Yes; but I shall not challenge Lieutenant Grunwald."

"May I tell you something of that Transylvania estate? Would you believe me if I did?"

"I will believe anything you say."

"You saw in the newspapers this morning that the Baroness is dead?"

“ Yes.”

“ A week ago I knew that the end was not far off. I telegraphed to her relatives in Austria, two women who do not inherit the estates, but will doubtless benefit financially, for she was not poor, as I told you. They arrived two days ago, and I, being of no further use, was dismissed. I had devoted my whole life to the Baroness, which was only my duty, for her father and mother, and she herself have been both kind and generous to me. The Transylvania estate was not inherited by her father, but purchased by him, because of its mineral properties. She had never seen it, and cared nothing for the prospects that had interested her father. I assisted Baron von Arrenfels in this and other things, tabulating the reports of the engineers, and arranging all the papers concerning it. I spoke about its potential wealth so often that one day the Baroness said she would leave it to me, that being the only property she could bequeath. I know she intended to do this, and perhaps she has done so. I truly hope she has, but fear not, because as she grew weaker and weaker, her memory seemed to fail. I therefore in a measure, you see, regarded this as my own. Unluckily, I told Lieutenant Grunwald, and he persuaded me to treat it as my

own, which led me into this horrible entanglement of deceit and fraud."

"Well, well; we will talk no more about it. I am much distressed that I should have forced this painful conversation upon you."

"Do you believe me?"

"Of course I do."

General Goetz, now Baron von Arrenfels, received the young man with charming politeness and cordiality, and when Stranleigh explained the purpose of his visit a shade of disappointment came over the Baron's face.

"I am very sorry," he said, "you did not telegraph me before leaving London, then I might have saved you a journey to Vienna."

"What!" cried Stranleigh in alarm, "has the property already been sold?"

"No; it does not belong to me. It was bequeathed by the Baroness to her attendant, Fraulein Seidel. You see, for some time I have been aware of the contents of the will made by the Baroness. She instructed her men of business to give me a copy."

When his lordship left for Paris he was a hundred thousand pounds richer than he had supposed himself to be when he quitted London.

At the very aristocratic club of Henri Quatre in Paris, famous for its high play, Lord Stranleigh had the advantage of an introduction to Lieutenant Grunwald, of Austria, enjoying the temporary celebrity of being the most fortunate gambler that the Club then contained.

Stranleigh laughed when challenged to play.

“No,” he said, “I never venture, because all games of cards are unknown to me. Besides, I shouldn’t care to play for the piffling stakes indulged in at the Henri Quatre. To labour at dealing out cards, to wait patiently for the result, and then win only three or four thousand pounds, what’s the use of it? It is merely hard work without adequate recompense.”

His audience laughed at this. Immense fortunes had been lost and won at the tables of the Henri Quatre ever since the time of that merry monarch.

“I think,” said the Lieutenant, “we can play high enough to suit even you. There are other games besides those of cards.”

“Will you play a game so simple that even a fool like myself can understand it?”

“Certainly! Play anything, so long as there’s money at the end of it.”

“Right you are!” exclaimed Stranleigh. “Now, here’s a pack face downwards on the table between

us. Venture any sum you like, and I'll cover it. We each lift a pile of cards from the top, and the man with the highest card takes the lucre. Then the man who loses puts up enough to cover the united stakes. Some outsider shuffles the pack, and the game thus proceeds until one or the other of us is cleaned out."

"Agreed," said the Lieutenant, placing on the table a hundred and twenty-five thousand francs in French bank-notes. Stranleigh took out a pocket-book, and selected five Bank of England notes for a thousand pounds each, throwing them down. The Lieutenant pulled a three of spades, and Stranleigh a queen of hearts. The money passed over to his lordship's side.

"Ten thousand pounds, Lieutenant."

The Lieutenant compressed his lips, but produced the amount. This time he drew an ace, and Stranleigh a king, and twenty thousand pounds lay heaped before the officer. Stranleigh calmly put down twenty Bank of England notes, and won.

"Damn it all!" cried the Lieutenant. "I don't carry the Bank of France in my pocket. Will you accept my I.O.U.?"

"No," laughed Stranleigh. "I belong to a country of tradesmen, and like to do business on a cash basis. But fortunately the day is early.

We have reliable servants in this Club. Send a message to your bank. As a military man, you know when to bring up reinforcements."

The messenger was sent, and when he returned the play went on, until three hundred and twenty thousand pounds were shoved across the table to Lord Stranleigh. Perspiration was pouring down the Lieutenant's face. He trembled with anger as he rose to his feet.

"I appeal to the Club!" he vociferated. "This is villainously unfair. Lord Stranleigh has come here prepared to crush me with the weight of money. He comes as a banker, not as a gentleman."

"Really, Lieutenant," put in the Duc d'Archambault, "if you have any complaint, it should be referred to the Committee, and not made a matter of brawling in the Club."

"Oh!" protested Stranleigh, "there's nothing here for the Committee to decide. You all saw that I entered this contest only after being repeatedly challenged. This money is mine by the rules of the game, and my possession of it cannot be questioned. The game is as simple as A.B.C., and was explained thoroughly to the Lieutenant before he began."

"That's true," murmured several of the members.

"I demand to know how much money Lord Stranleigh brought into this Club. I declare that

a search will show his pockets full of English bank-notes ; the flimsies that have ever been the curse of Europe."

" You have no right to make such a demand. However, as a matter of fact, I have less than a hundred pounds left. Here they are. I regret that luck has been against you, Lieutenant, but if you had won the last hazard, I should have occupied the position in which you now find yourself, namely, I should be compelled to send to my bank for more money. Of course I did not anticipate any trouble. I never had the pleasure of meeting the Lieutenant before. But let us have no disagreement."

" Easy to say that," growled the Lieutenant, " with three hundred and twenty thousand pounds in your grip."

" But I shall now propose to release my grip, unless any man here says the money was won unfairly."

" No one asserts that," said the Duc d'Archambault.

" Very well, Lieutenant. We are here, as it were, two foreigners, Austrian and English, in the most gallant country in the world. I make a sporting offer that will appeal to this gallantry. But first let me ask you : Are you a married man ? "

" No," replied the Lieutenant.

“Neither am I. Now, you select a wife for me, and I’ll select a wife for you. Whichever of us marries first, this money forms at least part of his wife’s dowry. Until one or other of us marries, the money lies in trust in custody of this Club.”

There was great cheering at this proposition; while Lieutenant Grunwald made no answer, but glared across the table at the genial Stranleigh.

“I call that a munificent offer,” approved the Duc, “when you remember that the money belongs entirely, unquestionably to Lord Stranleigh.”

“No matter for that,” declared his lordship.
“Now, Lieutenant, name the lady.”

The Lieutenant, with a scowl, said—

“I name the Princess Azelie of Austria.”

Stranleigh laughed.

“You see, gentlemen, how clever he is? He has beaten me in this contest of wits. The lady in question,” Stranleigh bowed deeply, “from the proudest Court in Europe, will reject my suit with scorn, and serve me right. I name, as Lieutenant Grunwald’s wife, Fraulein Seidel, of Vienna, with whom the Lieutenant is already acquainted.”

A month later the impounded fortune was claimed by the Lieutenant, and paid over to his bride.

THE END.



